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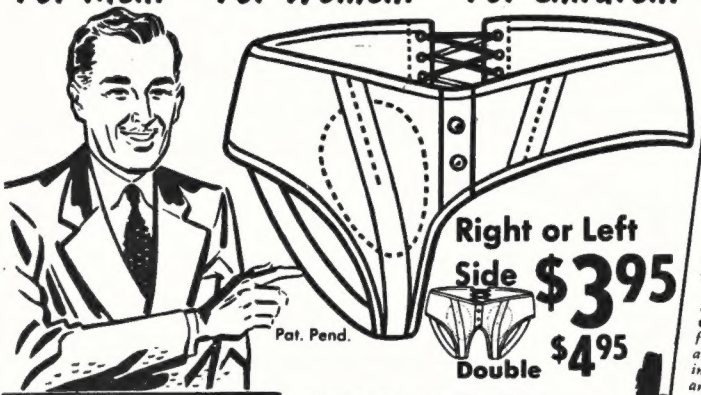

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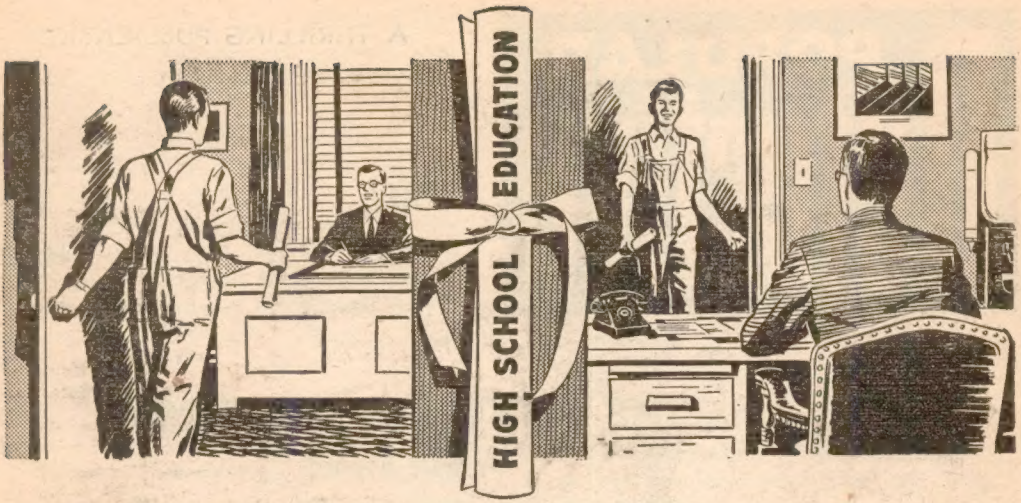

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POPULAR Detective

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

MAY, 1952

VOL. XLII No. 3

- Featured Novel

THE LOVELESS DIE FIRST

By Dale Bogard

Was it just because those young dolls liked Bogard's looks that they were ready to give their all to him? 12

- Two Novelets

CRY MURDER! ..... Donn Mullally 54
QUEST FOR A CORPSE ..... Sam Merwin, Jr. 82

- Seven Short Stories

DIVINING ROD MURDER CASE (True) ... Harold Helfer 11
THE NAKED TRUTH ..... Morris Cooper 68
KISS THE DEAD GIRL ..... Bruno Fischer 73
DANGER . . . MANIAC ..... David Alexander 101
IF THE SHOE DOESN'T FIT ..... Rufus Bakalor 109
ESCAPE OF DOOM ..... R. Van Taylor 111
WHO'S IN THE DARK? ..... William Degenhard 116

- Special Feature

THE SEX FRAME-UP ..... Frank Talker 6

- Other Features

END OF THE ROAD (Verse) ..... Clarence E. Flynn 23
CARTOON FUN ..... Reamer Keller 27
BUREAU OF MISSING PERSONS ..... A Department 53
PUZZLE PAGE ..... Brain Teasers 97
DETECTIVE MOVIE NEWS ..... Ann Kennedy 98
SIMPLE TRICKS FOIL CROOKS ..... Carter Critz 108
HOME WAS NEVER LIKE THIS ..... M. E. David 115
LOONY LAWS ..... Cellblock Sam 128

DAVID X. MANNERS
EDITOR

ALL STORIES IN THIS ISSUE ARE BRAND NEW

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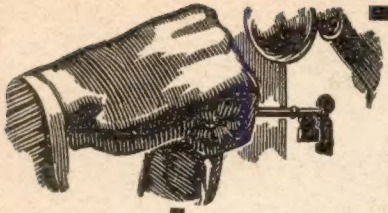

INSIDE STUFF

THE SEX FRAME-UP—AND HOW TO BEAT IT

FOR the past five years or so a new term has been in circulation for ladies of elastic morals. They call 'em the B-girls, nowadays; and whether the B stands for bed or something else is a matter we'll let the jargon-hounds fret about. This isn't about B-girls, however. It concerns a much more vicious category—the B-boys. In this case the B stands for blackmail.

The B-boys ply their ugly little trade only because most people are disgusted at the mere thought of being accused as homosexuals.

At a meeting of the national Congress of Correction in Biloxi, Mississippi, last October, E. M. Kates, superintendent of a state industrial farm in Virginia, said, "Homosexuality is not a rare offense, and yet its victims have been hounded as criminals and punished as such."

We can't disagree with that statement, but if it had been added that many people are hounded as homos when they aren't, it would come closer to hitting the plain facts.

Setting Up the Play

Take the case of T——— Q———, on record in the files of a Chicago court today. Q was arrested on a charge of arson, after the three-apartment house in which he lived caught fire due to the explosion of gas fumes in the kitchen of his home. He'd tried to take the short cut to eternity by opening all the gas jets, after taking the precaution of sending his wife to the movies. Either he forgot the pilot light or figured he'd be gone before it set off the mixture of gas and air. Whatever happened, it wouldn't matter to him, anyway. His mind was too full of his own troubles to think of anybody else.

Said troubles had begun three months before the suicide attempt. He'd gone to a picture show one evening. After the feature he found it necessary to visit the washroom. There he encountered a fox-faced youth with shifty eyes and a too-friendly manner. The youth was combing long, slicked-down hair which seemed to require no such careful grooming.

He struck up a conversation by bumming a cigarette. Q was in an amiable mood, the picture having been a riotous comedy by one of our more hectic teams of yokkers. He furnished the cigarette and a light. As he did so, the youth swifty disarranged his clothes and cried out, "Hey! What you doing?!"

Team Work

As if by a prearranged signal—which of course it was—one of the booth doors opened, and another young man stepped out. This individual scowled at Q truculently and asked the cigarette borrower, "Whassa matter, kid? This creep tryin' to make you?"

Q was dumfounded at the suddenness of what amounted to an accusation; for a moment he couldn't speak coherently. Before he'd recovered enough to make angry denial, the truculent youth was uttering loud threats. "Oughta turn you in to the cops!" "Imagine! A dirty ol' creep goin' around makin' propositions to kids like that!!"

It would be absurd, in the light of what ensued, to say that Q did some quick thinking. He was too stunned and scared to think at all. But his rattled mind projected all kinds of disagreeable and disgraceful possibilities on the screen of his mind.

What would his wife think if he were to be arrested and taken to the police station? What would his friends say? His boss at the store? After being involved in such a mess as this, even though he was not convicted, wouldn't

(Continued on page 8)

THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—*get across to him or her your ideas*? That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be *intentionally*, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have privately taught this nearly-lost art of the practical use of mind power.

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Name.....

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INSIDE STUFF

(Continued from page 6)

there always be the lingering suspicion that where there was smoke of that malodorous color there had probably been some fire? The prospect paralyzed his reason; he was in a panic to get away.

But the youths blocked his exit from the lavatory. They continued to discuss his alleged indecent proposal in indignant tones. What if they should be overheard, Q thought in terrified dismay. What if some neighbor or acquaintance should come in while the slick-haired framer-upper was shouting:

"The lousy pervert! He whispers to me, 'I'll give ya ten bucks,' and then he makes a pass at me! Let's call a cop, huh?"

The Wrong Thing to Do

By now Q was well aware that he was being framed, but he saw no way out, short of devastating disclosure. His first reaction was, "They must want dough." Why else go to all that trouble of timing the appearance of the second member of the team? The mention of ten dollars was enough to back up his conclusion. He reached for his wallet.

"I don't even have ten dollars," he protested. "Here—" he held out a five—"it's all I have."

The slick-haired boy grabbed the bill, but the older youth snatched at Q's wallet. He didn't keep it any longer than was required to make sure there was no more money in it and to read the name and address on the identification card in the window-panel of the billfold!

"Awright, panserino—" the truculent one tapped the identification card with a fingernail—"awright, we know who y'are and where y'live. Y'better come through with that other five—or it'll be just too damned bad."

Q started to argue, but the slick-haired youth snarled, "You be back here a week from tonight with that other five bucks or I'll make you wish you had!"

The rest of the story should be obvious, painfully obvious. Q decided, once he'd gotten away from them and out of the movie theatre, to stay well away from that locality for a while. But six days later he had a phone call at his home.

It was the slick-haired blackmail boy reminding him of his "date" on the following night. "Ya better be there, creep, unless ya want me to come around to your place of business and raise a stink! Get me?"

Q understood. He kept the appointment, sweating, and paid, hoping to get away quickly and have an end to the ugly business. But the blackmail boys don't let a victim off the hook so easily. There were others of the slick-haired lad's gang present. Also, there were more threats coupled with the fact that Q had come to the theatre for what easily could have been made to appear a second assignation.

More money would be required to keep the evil matter hushed up. He began to dip into the cash register at the store in order to keep his wife from wondering why ten dollars were invariably missing from his pay envelope every week.

The suicide attempt followed his exposure as a thief at the store.

The Moral

Now the moral of this nasty episode—if such a rotten business could be said to have other than an immoral side—is this. Anybody could, in all innocence, be caught in a trap as Q was, unless these points are borne in mind:

NEVER, under any circumstances, submit to being browbeaten into an appearance of guilt in such a situation. If there should be any such frame-up, there will always be the implied coercion of the police in the background. Take the bull by the horns, so to speak; demand a visit to the station house, insist on it. There'll

be no further attempt at extortion, be certain of it.

NEVER, under any circumstances, submit to any demand for blackmail money. If you don't come through the first time, there'll never be a second.

ALWAYS—but always—report such an attempt by the B-boys to your local plainclothes detective. They're as keen to put a stop to such ratty practices as you ought to be.

Finally, don't be too startled if such a trap is laid for you. It happens scores of times every week in big cities all over the country, according to competent police authorities.

So be warned but don't be scared of publicity. There won't be any. I give you my word on that.

—Frank Talker

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15 MINUTES LATER
WHERE'D YOU GO, LEFTY? THE BOYS'LL HAVE THE CAR AT THE GATE IN 10 MINUTES. WE'VE GOTTA WORK FAST
OKAY. LET'S GO
LINE UP, FOLKS! THIS IS A HOLDUP! COVER THE DOOR, LEFTY!
I'M COVERING YOU, CLOWN! DROP THAT GUN!
WE'VE GOT THE OTHERS, LIEUTENANT. HERE ARE THE CLOTHES YOU LEFT OUTSIDE
GOOD! TAKE THIS BIRD ALONG. I'LL BE DOWN AFTER I CHANGE

BUT, DAD, HOW...?
LIEUTENANT ROGER'S STORY CAN WAIT 'TILL HE SHEDS THAT COSTUME. FOLLOW ME, "CAPTAIN KIDD"
HERE'S THE CURE FOR YOUR WHISKERS
THANKS, MR. DAVIES
WHAT A SWELL BLADE! TWO DAYS' STUBBLE GONE LIKE MAGIC!
THIN GILLETTES HAND OUT QUICK, EASY SHAVES EVERY TIME

I KNEW LEFTY WAS COMING AS "CAPTAIN KIDD", BUT I COULDN'T IDENTIFY HIS PAL, SO...
GREAT WORK!
JUST THE CHAP TO HEAD UP OUR ATOMIC SECURITY FORCE
M-M-M-HANDSOME

YOU ENJOY SMOOTHER, BETTER-LOOKING SHAVES AT A REAL SAVING WITH THIN GILLETTES. NO OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADE APPROACHES THEM FOR KEENNESS AND LONG LIFE. THIN GILLETTES ARE MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR TO A "T"... PROTECT YOU FROM THE SCRAPE AND IRRITATION OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT 10-BLADE PACKAGE

TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

The DIVINING ROD MURDER CASE

A True Story

by HAROLD HELFER

THIS is a piece about how a Y-shaped stick once broke a murder case.

Mrs. Minnie Roderick, wife of a San Mateo County, Calif., rancher, dropped in on Sheriff James J. McGrath and reported that her husband, Frank, was missing.

She told the sheriff that he'd beaten her severely, then dressed up in his "store clothes," stuffed his pockets with all the cash on hand, some $2800, and drove away in an auto with a red-haired woman.

That was several days ago and he hadn't returned.

The sheriff went back with Mrs. Roderick to her ranch and looked the place over. He gave it a pretty good going over, but without turning up anything that would throw any light whatsoever on the rancher's disappearance.

Yet there was something about the way the woman had told her story that made the sheriff feel there was something sinister involved.

The next day the sheriff was back again at the Roderick ranch. This time he had something with him—a smallish Y-shaped tree limb.

He handed it to Mrs. Roderick.

She looked at it quite startled. Y-shaped sticks like this were looked upon by some as "divining rods." Superstition had it that these sticks suddenly pointed downward when they were over subterranean water. Some folks used these "mystic sticks" in attempting to locate the right spots for digging wells.

"What—what do you want me to do with this?" the woman, regarding the stick oddly, asked the sheriff.

"Just hold it and walk about the ranch with me," he told her.

They started walking across the vast ranchland. But only a few minutes later the "divining rod" suddenly went dropping out of the woman's hand and she screamed wildly.

A ranch hand, William Woodring, came running over and wanted to know what the matter was.

"Nothing," said the sheriff. "Except that we're going to dig here. Just where the divining rod fell."

Sheriff McGrath then summoned some deputies and digging began. A few feet later they saw that they had come upon an old abandoned well.

That wasn't all they discovered. At the bottom of this well was a body—the late Frank Roderick. He'd been shot through the head.

The highly nervous woman and the ranch hand were soon spilling out confessions to the sheriff, each blaming the other for actually firing the fatal bullet into the rancher's head.

It was enough for the jury, though, that a conspiracy had existed to do in the rancher and take over his ranch, and both Mrs. Roderick and Handyman William Woodring were meted out life imprisonment sentences.

Of course, Sheriff McGrath didn't reveal until the case was sewed-up that he'd ascertained from a previous owner of the ranch about the existence of the abandoned well and then deliberately steered in that direction the wife with the "divining rod"—and guilty conscience.

The LOVELESS DIE FIRST

A Novel by DALE BOGARD

Was it just because those young dolls liked Bogard's looks that they were ready to give their all to him—or was it really some guy's corpse that had them hot and bothered?

"Drop that rod, copper," she said. "You, too, Johnnie!"

Chapter I

I PUT my elbows on the polished bar in Marty Alton's in Greenwich Village and ordered beer. The bartender drew it from a pump like they have in English pubs, which is one reason why I am solid for Marty Alton. The second reason is the kind of jazz music you can hear there. Any night Marty's seven-piece isn't playing I am liable to be located at Eddie Condon's on West Third Street—which tells you right away that when it comes to jazz music I'm strictly a moldy fig, and if that doesn't mean a thing to you we'll pass it up and just add that the third reason I go to Marty's is the cooking.

Sometimes I go with Lucy Marling, who writes the best sob stuff New York has read in years, for the tabloid I used to work on before I quit to write books and become a private eye—but I'm an old-fashioned guy at heart and it gets tiresome to keep telling Lucy I'm going home to bed. Particularly as Lucy has looks and charm and bends in all the places where a girl should bend.

Get this, it isn't that I hate women—but

I never could get it out of my brain that Lucy was just somebody I worked with, and I guess I still feel that way now that I've given up the newspaper game. I have the feeling she might interrupt any tender sentiments I directed her way to voice doubts about whether her latest story made the front page in the Five Star Final—and no old-fashioned guy cares to take a risk like that.

So most times when I go to Marty's little club I just go with Dale Bogard, that tall, thirty-six-year-old guy with a gray streak or two in his black hair, an old Buick convertible, a two-room apartment, not much money in the bank, but a comfortable feeling that he doesn't have to take orders from anybody.

Of course, Bogard has to pay for his independence—sometimes by having tough guys sock him or poke .22 target pistols at him out of the dark night, but he has the idea that the price isn't too high. If ever it gets too high you won't be able to read any more Dale Bogard novels on account of there won't be any more Dale Bogard.

Well, the beer came along the bar and I wrapped a hand around it. It looked good and it felt cold. The way it does at Marty's any time of the year—and tonight it was along about mid-November.

THERE were a lot of people in the bar and over on the little platform the trumpet man was manipulating the water key of his instrument and the trombonist was taking a few tentative swipes at the chord structure of those old *Basin Street Blues*.

I had half my drink, set the glass back on the counter and lit a Lucky. I let the smoke out in a long thin spiral and put my elbows back on the bar.

That was when I noticed two other elbows about a couple of inches from mine. They had just arrived. They were girl's elbows. I turned just a little to bring her into focus. She had a severely-cut suit in jade green whipcord but she was carrying the jacket over her knees as she perched on the high stool so that her figure announced itself through the white blouse. Her hair was very red and her nose tilted just enough to make her oval face something better than ordinary.

She said without looking at me: "Good-evening, Mr. Bogard."

"A minute ago I didn't think it was," I told her.

That made her turn so that I could see she had a wide scarlet mouth and green eyes. If she was amused they would both tell you about it. That was why I knew she had trouble.

"I want to talk to you," she said. She was using a contralto voice which would sound all right singing the blues.

I said: "I always like beautiful women to talk to me."

The corners of her wide mouth moved jerkily and a slow flush spread over her face and was gone.

"What exactly do you think I'm trying to do?" The contralto voice had hardened and her teeth bit each other. They were small and white and a little wet so that they glistened.

"I don't have the least idea," I said. "Suppose you tell me?"

She put her lips together in a long arc, opened them to say: "I wish to—to consult you professionally."

So I had to buy her a Martini—which I wouldn't have had to do if she had observed my office hours. Hell—I told her so.

"I didn't want anyone to see me going in," she answered simply.

I shrugged, picked up both the drinks and walked over to one of the booths. She came right along behind me. When she sat down she crossed one nyloned leg over the other, and they were very nice legs.

She sat there silently for a moment. Finally, she said quietly: "You're very sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"It's an act," I said. "It costs nothing to learn, and it impresses clients."

She laughed then for the first time. It made her voice sound low and musical and it sent tiny crinkles out from the sides of her eyes. Suddenly, I decided that she was twenty-five years old.

"You're an unusual man," she said. "But I don't believe you're tough at all."

"Should I be?"

"Well, I always thought private detectives were hardboiled men with whisky on

their breath and pistols strapped under their arms."

I let that pass.

She said then: "My name is Loretta Deslay. I want you to stop my brother from making a damned fool of himself."

"I don't handle divorce business," I said.

Her eyes widened out so that the pupils looked like emerald islands in a cream sea.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I thought your brother might be mixed up in something—as a prospective co-respondent," I explained. "Is that all wrong?"

She flared: "I think you're being cheap and nasty." She said in a low level voice: "My brother—he's really my half-brother—is Johnnie Barkley. I think he's getting himself involved with some undesirable associates. He won't listen to me. I want to hire a private detective to throw a scare into him."

"What kind of undesirables is your half-brother running around with, Miss Deslay?"

She flipped a cigarette out of one of those miniature cases women carry in their handbags and sat there tapping it absently on her thumb-nail and not lighting it.

"A man named Milt Opal," she answered. "Does that mean anything to you?"

I STRAIGHTENED my jacket and gave her one of those hard looks you read about. "Miss Deslay," I said carefully, "Milt Opal is very dangerous people in this city. If little Johnnie is tangling with the Opal gang, I think you'd better keep your chin right out of sight. And if you figure you can hire my chin as a stand-in, just forget it and go home like a nice, respectable girl."

"So you're yellow?" She was trying to sneer.

"Like a giant sunflower," I cracked.

"I—I'll pay you."

"Yeah," I told her, "you'd sure have to—about a million bucks."

I half rose, but she stopped me when she said: "All I want is for you to have a private talk with Johnnie. You don't have to see Milt Opal."

She went on: "Johnnie is weak. He's been going around with a lot of high-steppers. That's how he got to know Milt Opal. I think he's fascinated by the thought of being a sort of little big shot and latching on to a lot of easy money. I want you to see him, tell him you're a private detective with reason to believe that he's getting close to trouble. He—" she hesitated—"he's rather easily scared."

I called the waiter and ordered two more Martinis. I said: "Milt Opal doesn't ordinarily hire little boys who scare easy. How do you explain it?"

Her eyes clouded. "I—I don't know. Except that Johnnie gets sort of larger than life when an idea hits him and he can put up a front."

"It'd have to be a good front to fool Milt Opal," I said grimly. "But all right, let's suppose your Johnnie has delusions of grandeur—figures he's in line to be a big shot. So what?"

"If you went to him and told him that you were a private detective and tipped him off to watch his step, I believe he'd stop what he's doing while there's still time."

I thought that one out for maybe half a minute. What did I have to lose?

"All right," I said, "I'll go see your kid brother. Where does he live?"

She gave me an address in the East Fifties. Then, suddenly, she looked embarrassed. "How much will it cost me?" she asked.

"I work for fifty a day, plus expenses," I told her. "You can pay me when I report to you. How do I do that?"

She told me where she lived. She was drawing on the green whipcord jacket, and on an impulse I reached out my right hand and tilted her long red hair so that it settled down outside the lapel. I kind of liked her.

Without looking at me she said: "Could you see him tonight?"

"You mean—at once?"

"Yes." She paused a moment and added slowly: "You see, I have to work and if you can do this for me tonight it will cost me only fifty dollars."

I looked at my wrist watch. It was a few minutes after nine. "I'll be at your apartment in an hour," I said.

We were getting up when I asked: "How did you know about me?"

"I know a newspaperman named Delaney. He told me you would be a good man to consult and he said I might find you here tonight. I recognized you from his description."

We walked across the little floor just as the band was riding high wide and handsome into *Basin Street*. The group-improvised counterpoint had a beat as solid as the Empire State Building. Marty Alton—short, stocky and urbanely solicitous—showed us out on to the street under the striped awning. I thought his blue eyes had that look. I didn't tell him how wrong he was.

Out on the sidewalk Loretta Deslay said: "I—I think I'll grab a cab home."

"You *could* sit in my car when I go up to see your brother."

She compressed her lips again. "No." She said it with finality. "I don't want to be around when you have your talk."

I shrugged, hailed a passing cab for her and left her.

THE apartment house ran to five stories and was still new enough to have some of its original color. The place was within easy walking distance of the Cornell Medical Center—which might be useful to Johnnie Barkley if he didn't pay any attention to the tipoff I was about to hand him.

The downstairs door was open and I went in and up. Apartment 4-B was halfway down the fourth-floor corridor on the left. The name on the door said: *John B. Barkley*. I rang the bell. Maybe Johnnie wanted a minute while he got out of the bath or told his girl friend to zip up her dress. So I gave him a minute—almost. Then I thumbed the bell again and lit my pipe.

I shrugged. Little Johnnie must be out, though his half-sister seemed pretty damn sure he'd be in. Finally, I knocked. I'm one of those guys who never can ring a bell without rapping on the door as a final check.

I did it half-heartedly, but the door swung noiselessly inward. The room was dark. I reached out with my left hand and groped for the light switch. I found it all right and pressed it down. I was looking into a living room equipped with a slightly faded carpet and the usual shoddy furniture. A heavily-built man was sitting back in one of a pair of club chairs, facing me.

I knew he wasn't Johnnie Barkley on account of he looked a dead ringer for John Jesse Ruystader, the sixty-year-old president of the Merchants Banking Trust, whose picture stares at you every once in a while from the financial columns of the more conservative sheets. In fact, he *was* John Jesse Ruystader, but this time he wasn't staring. His eyes were wide open but they weren't ever going to stare at anything again. There was a neat hole in the upper left-hand region of his beautifully-laundered white shirt, and very little blood.

He was as dead as a codfish on a marble slab.

Chapter II

WITH one hand I pulled the door shut behind me. With the other I turned the key in the lock. I looked down at the rug between the two chairs. Somebody had pulled the edges to straighten it out. They had probably done it mechanically after Ruystader had fallen there when he was shot. Because that was where he was shot by someone who stood over near the tall window which gave a view of the Queensboro Bridge.

There were no powder marks on his shirt. Just the neat round hole. The slug would still be in his heart.

A door on the left led into a small bedroom. I took my Luger out, flicked off the safety-catch and walked on in. Johnnie Barkley wasn't in there. I pulled open the door to the closet. His clothes were gone—except for an old raincoat and a pair of faded gray pants. A small chest still held some of his shirts and underwear and there were a pair of tan shoes in a corner of the room. But all his better junk wasn't there.

I grinned mirthlessly. It looked as if Johnnie Barkley had taken it on the lam. I didn't think the message I was going to give to Loretta Deslay would rate fifty dollars of her dough.

But it didn't matter now. This was something too big for me, or any private eye to mess around with. I knew I was going to

have to buzz Homicide. All I had to do was pick up the telephone and a carload of detectives, bluecoats, photoflash men, fingerprint experts and a couple of assistants from the D.A.'s office would be moving in on the joint before I could get the receiver back on its cradle.

So I decided not to pick up the phone. Not Johnnie Barkley's phone. I still had a client to think about.

I slid into my Buick and rode a couple of blocks. At a drug store I called the police. I didn't ask for Homicide. I just told them where they could find a murdered man—and hung up before there was any comeback.

Then I drove up to where Cathedral Parkway intersects Amsterdam Avenue. The Langton Apartments were near the park. The sidewalk was tree-lined and well-lit. There were one or two cars parked, but not a soul about. The apartment I was looking for was on the second floor just opposite the elevator.

I pushed the bell. The bell was still ringing when the door opened. A girl stood six inches from me. She would weigh about a hundred and twenty and stood maybe five feet eight in the high-heels she wasn't wearing, which made her stand not more than five feet five. She had on a pale blue satin robe and nothing under it except her panties and bra, and the reason I knew that was because she hadn't bothered to fasten the sash of the robe. Her nylons were held up by fetching

As I spoke, I slung the cat across to her

baby pink garters with rosettes.

"Yes?" She said it with her husky voice, her cerise lips, her dazzling teeth, her black flashing eyes and with a full-length shimmy down her entire length. She leaned sideways against the door with her chin thrusting out a little and her figure thrusting out a bit more than that.

I heard a voice asking if Miss Loretta Deslay lived there. It had to be my voice on account of there was nobody else around.

About this time she decided I had seen enough for free. She pulled her robe around her and said: "Won't you come in?"

I followed her into a living room. It had a pale wood-block floor and a lot of expensive-looking functional furniture. There was a heavy scent of Arpège, Virginia Rounds, gin and femininity. If Miss Loretta Deslay lived here I had her all wrong.

SHE swayed across the floor to a cocktail cabinet, turned her face a little over her shoulder so I could see how the profile rated.

"You would like a drink—yes?" There was just the slightest accent. It seemed to be Spanish.

I told her: "I always like a drink, but just now I would like it a whole lot better if you answered the question I asked."

She went ahead and fixed highballs.

"What was that?" She came toward me with the drinks and stood looking at me with those unwinking black eyes.

I told her what it was and she shrugged.

"I do not know any Loretta Deslay," she said. If she had even a passing interest in the subject I didn't get it.

"This *is* apartment 2-A, isn't it?"

She held the glass tilted against her wide mouth and nodded while she looked at me.

I backed off a little and blundered against the massive arm of the davenport. "I seem to have got the address all wrong," I said. "Miss Deslay told me this was her apartment."

She gave a little smile against her white teeth and shook her head slowly from side to side, the way you sometimes see little girls do it.

We didn't seem to be getting any place, but I had to say something, so I said: "You don't know me. Why did you ask me in?"

She set her glass down on one of the tables very deliberately and used the flats of her hands to smooth her robe down over her thighs.

"I like men," she said simply.

"Yeah?" I said. "Do you invite all the stray callers in?"

"Only the ones who look interesting. And tall, dark men in their thirties have the most interesting look. I'm a little tired of the boyish kind. What's your name, big man?"

I told her. I told it rather shortly and finished my drink. I thought it was time to get the hell out of here.

She said: "I am Dolores Vasquez and I was born in Santa Fe. I have been living in your so-big city for three years. It is cold here winters, is it not?"

I stood up and picked my hat off another of the little tables. She made a tiny movement with her hands and her robe slid wide open this time. Her skin was a golden color and the aureoles of her breasts were almost black and as big as dollars.

She didn't come toward me or make any movement. Quite calmly she said: "I am pretty to look at—am I not?"

The insides of my hands were sticky and the roof of my mouth was as hot and as dry as the Painted Desert. If I still had legs I wasn't particularly aware of it.

Then she left the robe slide straight off her golden shoulders. She turned slowly round as though she was posing before a mirror.

When she was facing me again, she said in a sultry undertone: "You like that . . . better?"

I didn't answer because as she finished speaking she let herself fall sideways in a long graceful arc so that I had to catch her. The skin of her back was as smooth as spun silk and as hot as the desert wind south of the Border. She lay with her head hanging back so that her huge mane flowed over my arm.

"Kiss me," she said.

As she said it she reached up with one long naked arm and pulled my head down to her. She was surprisingly strong. I could feel her parted lips on mine. Then we were

sinking into the davenport and I could hear music that was out of this world.

Her eyes were shut but her lips were moving.

"You are a so-beautiful man," she breathed. She took my hand and began to guide it over her body.

Suddenly, I made a little movement to dislodge her, but she held on.

"You don't like me?" she said.

I did, but I had something else on my mind. The window drapes seemed to be moving and there wasn't any wind. I shoved her away and raised up on one elbow so I could jerk out my Luger, but I didn't quite make it.

A SLIM blond boy who would be about twenty-three years old came through the drapes. He had a dissolute look on his pale face and a .38 Smith and Wesson in his hand.

He grated: "Get up, beautiful—and I don't mean the dame."

That was when I stood up. The way you have to when someone is poking a .38 S and W at you. Even a punk kid like Johnnie Barkley. I didn't have to be told that was his name. It didn't seem he could have any other name.

I said: "You're Johnnie Barkley, aren't you?"

The fact that the blue gun barrel wavered fractionally was something I didn't miss.

"Yeah—I'm Johnnie Barkley," he said carefully. "What's that to you?"

I told him it was plenty to me.

"Such as what?" The boy was trying to put on a jeer. He wasn't very good at it.

"Your sister is worried about you," I told him.

Dolores Vasquez had retired to the bedroom. By squinting sideways I could see that she was putting some clothes on. I thought she needed them and I thought what a damned fool I had nearly been.

I poured out a couple of shots of her whisky and held one out to the kid. He took it, but he didn't holster his gun.

"Okay, Johnnie," I said evenly. "Your sister is worried about you. Me, I'm a private dick who is trying to get you out of trouble. Does that mean a thing to you?"

He let his pale blue eyes wander over me. I knew he was trying to act tough and he wasn't that kind of a boy. Suddenly I felt sorry for him.

"I don't know what you're talking about." There was a little choke in his kid's voice.

I let my hands go into my pockets for cigarettes and matches and he didn't do a thing to stop me.

I said: "Look—a very important guy was found shot to death in your apartment not more than an hour ago. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you, Johnnie?"

His pupils widened out so that you could hardly see the whites. He let a long thin finger curl round the trigger.

"What are you trying to sell me?"

"I'm not trying to sell you anything, Johnnie," I said. "I'm telling you something that maybe you ought to know."

"Go on." He barely whispered the words.

I went on. "My name is Bogard and what I said about your sister is straight. She thinks you may be up to your neck in trouble if you don't stop running around with Milt Opal. So she asked me to go see you in your apartment. When I get there what did I find but John Jesse Ruystader dead with a slug in his heart sitting in one of your chairs."

The boy burst out then: "You're lying! You're just a dirty prying shamus! I—"

I poured a little more whisky in my glass, though I didn't have any need of it now. I knew he wasn't going to shoot.

"Johnnie," I said, "I am not making this up. It all happened the way I told you. John Jesse Ruystader is dead in your apartment."

I COULD see the little beads of sweat as they rolled down the side of his thin, pale nose. I could see his gun-hand tremble. On impulse, I stepped up to him and took the weapon away.

"You've never fired a gun in your life, have you?" I asked gently.

Suddenly, he slumped. Now he looked as hard as a package of butter left out in the noon sun.

"No." He said it mechanically.

"You never fired this or any other gun at Ruystader?"

"Ruystader's just a name to me. I maybe read it in the newspapers once or twice, but I wouldn't even know what he looked like." He spoke the words dully. Then, all of a sudden, he seemed to see for the first time where everything was leading. He lifted his head and fought to stop his lip from quivering.

"You mean—the police will think I killed him?" His voice shook with terror.

"They'll ask you a lot of questions," I said. "Can you answer them?"

"I told you I never met this Ruystader in my life," he shouted.

That brought Dolores Vasquez back into the living room. She had put on a vivid scarlet dress a size small for her so that you couldn't miss any curves. Just to make sure, the neckline went down to here.

"What are you trying to do to my Johnnie?" Her voice had lost the lush overtones of seduction.

I told her that John Jesse Ruystader was dead in Johnnie Barkley's apartment and that it looked as if Johnnie Barkley was going to have to do some talking in the big building downtown.

She got a cigarette out and lit it with a slow, extravagant casualness.

"Or you," she said at length.

"If I had bumped Ruystader I wouldn't have come marching in here to tell Johnnie or anyone else," I grunted. "Try again, baby."

Johnnie Barkley sad: "Do the police know yet?"

"I called Homicide before I came on here. They'll be going through your apartment about now."

He said: "I left my apartment this morning. I haven't been in it since."

"Can you prove that?"

He stood there looking at his tan shoes.

I sighed. "I get it. You've been somewhere, but you don't want to say where it was."

"I told you I never—"

"Yeah, I know what you told me," I snarled. "You can tell me anything you want and you don't have to make it stick. It won't be that way when they get you down to Headquarters. What are you trying to cover up, Johnnie?"

DOLORES VASQUEZ cut in: "Can't you see the poor kid's sick with worry? Why don't you stop riding him?"

I spread my hands wearily. "I'm not trying to ride him," I said. "I'm playing a hunch that Johnnie didn't have a thing to do with Ruystader's death and I'm willing to help him a little. If he's going to be stupid, the cops may take a dim view of it." I paused, then looked hard at her: "What's your interest in him?"

She didn't answer. She didn't have to.

Johnnie Barkley said: "What do you think I ought to do, Bogard?"

"Go back to your apartment and face it."

He stood there thinking it out. Dolores Vasquez moved across the room to the cocktail cabinet and poured three highballs. She came back to us with the drinks on a little glass tray.

He took his drink absently. I wondered again why Milt Opal should waste time on a callow boy with so little fight in him.

I drank half of my highball and I knew at once that I shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have drunk any of it. There was a funny taste to it which I couldn't identify because nobody had even fed me a knockout drop before. I was suddenly sick to my stomach.

I got both hands on to a chair back and hung on. I could see two girls, one figure merging with the other, then wobbling apart again.

A fuzzy voice boomed: "Take it easy, lover. Everything's going to be all right." It was Dolores who spoke, but her voice sounded strange, far off.

Johnnie Barkley walked around behind me. I thought he was going to catch me when I fell—or give me a tap on the head just to help things along. Either way I couldn't do a thing about it because my knees were starting to go and I could feel myself sliding down, dragging the chair with me.

Then the floor came up and smacked me in the face and there was no light anywhere. . . .

Chapter III

I WOKE up with two concrete slabs on my eyelids and when I got them off the pupils felt like hot pinheads. Somebody had stuffed an oversize dirty boxing-glove into my mouth and the top of my skull kept opening and shutting.

I lay still. My eyes started to focus and the big glove in my mouth shrunk enough for me to know that it was my tongue.

I was lying on a car seat. It was my own car. It was on the side of a wide lighted thoroughfare and there was water over to my left. I was pulled over on the grass somewhere along the West Side Highway, I realized gradually. Other cars hummed past me and I knew I'd better do a little driving myself before a prowl car picked me up.

I started the motor. I moved off onto the concrete when there was a break in the traffic, and left that speedway at the first exit. I was over on Broadway when I remembered the Ruystaders lived on the Drive up beyond Grant's Tomb, and for no real reason I wanted to see their place.

But first I stopped outside a cigar store. I got on a phone and called the cozy apartment where Dolores Vasquez had so recently entertained me. There was no answer and I hadn't expected there would be. Johnny Barkley had taken it on the lam and maybe Dolores Vasquez was with him.

My head had stopped aching, the sockets of my eyes had stopped burning and I felt ready for anything. Anything peaceful and well-ordered with no more knock-out drops and no more torrid Mexican beauties.

The Ruystader town house was a little farther along the Drive than I thought—near the bend before you hit 155th Street. I started to pull up, and then changed my mind. Not because there were three squad cars at the curb but on account of the fact that a girl with very red hair was just driving off in a small black sedan.

I thought I would know Loretta Deslay, rear view, anywhere.

I drove on, kept her car in sight. She turned on to Broadway and headed into midtown. Then she made a couple more turns—and I started to get an odd feeling. A feeling that we were heading for my place.

In a few minutes the idea became reality. She had turned into my block and pulled up in front of my house. I stopped behind her just as she was getting out.

"I have a report ready for you, price fifty dollars," I said softly. "And it's no bargain."

Her back was still toward me as I spoke. She spun around and all the color rushed from her pretty face. She held one hand against her left breast and her words came out all mixed up with a rush of agitated breath.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh! It's you. I was just—"

"Yeah," I said. "You were just going to pay me a late business call. Well, come on. It's getting cold outside. It usually does around midnight."

I took hold of her elbow and steered her through the entrance. In the elevator, I thumbed the button and we rode on up to my floor.

SHE STOOD in the center of the little living room, when I took her into the apartment, taking it all in while she drew her long gloves off, took off her hat and did something to her hair.

I said: "Would you like whisky, gin or coffee?"

"Coffee," she said. "I feel like drinking something that steams."

I walked on through to the kitchenette and put eight spoonfuls into the percolator. She followed on in and said: "Where do you keep your cups and saucers?"

When I showed her she began setting them out. Then she opened the refrigerator and started fussing round with cold chicken and looking for crackers.

I walked back into the living room and turned on the radio. The dance music was soft and cloying, but if you turned it low it sounded about right for the circumstances.

Over my shoulder I called: "Why did you have to lie to me about where you lived?"

She came out of the kitchenette and stood in the doorway, leaning a little against the side, and looking at me without moving an eyelash.

"Because I didn't want to tell you where I really lived."

"But you knew I was going to report to you."

"Oh yes. But I meant to come back and wait outside or near to Johnnie's place for you. Something stopped me."

I said: "When you told me you lived at the Langton Apartments did you know there was such a place?"

"It was the first address that sprang into my mind. I didn't really know where it was. I must have heard it somewhere. I just—sort of said it."

"Well, I've been there," I said grimly. "A young woman lives there who answers to the name of Dolores Vasquez. She wanted me to make love to her."

Her eyes flickered about a thousandth of an inch.

"Did you?" she said.

"I was seriously considering it," I said, "when a blond young guy walked in carrying a gun."

This time her eyes flickered more and her right hand was touching her breast again.

"He was Johnnie Barkley," I said.

She walked on into the room and sat down on the arm of one of the big overstuffed chairs.

"Earlier, when I went to your brother's apartment, he wasn't there. But somebody else was. A dead man, with a bullet in or near his heart. He had been killed instantly. His name was John Jesse Ruystader."

Now her face was completely drained of color, but she didn't twist her hands, nor did her lovely breasts indicate quickened breathing.

"Does all this make sense to you?" I asked.

"Should it?"

"I'm asking," I said.

She went on saying nothing.

"It has, I think—but you don't want to tell me," I snapped.

She opened her eyes wide and gave me a long look. "I had nothing to do with the murder—if it is murder—of Ruystader, if that's what you mean."

"Strangely enough, that's what your little brother told me."

THE COFFEE was running over in the kitchenette and I went back and turned down the jet. She followed me and started pouring. We stood about two inches from one another and I could feel the warmth of her body through her clothes and see the enticing cleavage of her breasts.

Suddenly, she stopped what she was doing and turned to face me. "I just know Johnnie couldn't do a thing like that. He's only twenty-one—four years younger than I am. Just a weak kid with crazy ideas. That was why I asked you to see him. You were too late, that's all."

"I know," I said. "Maybe I could have steered him away from trouble. Maybe not. But the fact is that Ruystader was found dead in his apartment. That stands Johnnie right on the spot."

"What did he tell you?"

"Just that he didn't do it, didn't know Ruystader, had never seen him in his life—and that he hadn't been back to his apartment all day."

She put a spoon in her coffee and stirred up the sugar absently. "Then he will be all right."

"If he can prove where he's been."

"Of course he can!" She raised her voice a little and the color was coming back into her face.

"I wonder. He refused to tell me where he had been all day. He turned up at the Vasquez girl's apartment because he's playing around with her. I mean she's his mistress."

Loretta Deslay gave a tiny wince.

"The fact that you gave me her address was sheer chance—or was it?" I went on. "I should say that the reason you told me was that you had heard the address somewhere, maybe from Johnnie. So when you had to think up a phony address for yourself, it just slipped out."

I sighed. "Finding Ruystader dead in your brother's place was just a little too much for a private investigator to handle if he means to keep his license. I called Police Headquarters. I didn't tell them who I was—though I will have to do that pretty damn soon."

"Why?"

"Because I've seen your brother. The police will have to know that. They will also have to know that Johnnie Barkley has apparently taken a runout powder."

This time she jumped—enough to rattle the cup in the saucer she was holding and spill some of the coffee.

I said: "While I was trying to make your kid brother see a little sense, the Vasquez girl poured us some drinks. I was stupid enough to take mine. Next thing I knew I woke up in my car on the West Side Highway, feeling like something rejected by the city health administration. When I had recovered a little I called her apartment—and there was no reply."

"What *do* you think, Mr. Bogard?"

"I think it likely she was seeing him off from Grand Central Station."

"But—but how will she explain about giving you a drugged drink?"

"She won't have to explain that. She will say I never was at her apartment. I can't prove I was."

The radio had stopped playing the dance music we hadn't heard and an announcer was reading a newscast. I went over and turned it off.

I got a pipe off a rack and started packing it. I said, slowly and carefully: "I saw you drive away from the Ruystader place a little while ago."

Loretta Deslay didn't jump this time. "Yes—I was there."

"Because you knew already that Ruystader was dead?"

"Would I go to see him—if I knew?"

I grabbed her and turned her toward me. I felt her slender shoulders quivering.

"Why did you go there?" I demanded.

She drew herself away and began drawing her gloves on. "I had a reason," she said. "I can't tell you what it was."

"And you expect me not to tell the police?"

"I can't stop you," she said. "But I hope you won't do it—not yet." She came back to me and said: "Please, will you trust me just a little? What I went to the Ruystaders' for had nothing in this world to do with his murder. I can't even begin to understand why Mr. Ruystader should be in Johnnie's apartment. Everything is too fantastic—"

I picked up my phone.

"What are you going to do?" she breathed.

"I think," I said, "it's time I called Homicide and did a little explaining."

She looked dismayed, but she didn't try to stop me. I began speaking into the mouthpiece. Then I quit. Footsteps were sounding along the corridor. Then the door opened and a tall, thin pale guy stepped into the room without troubling to knock.

Detective-lieutenant Desmond O'Cassidy never did give a damn about formalities.

I PUT the receiver back on its cradle. "I was just going to buzz you, Cass," I said. It sounded about as convincing as a small boy's alibi when Pop catches him smoking in the woodshed.

He came on into the room. He had his

END OF THE ROAD

By Clarence E. Flynn

He traveled down the easy way,
And played it rough and strong;
But found upon accounting day
It wasn't very long.

It brought him to a little home
With dim and echoing halls.
It had a watch tower for a dome,
And steel-barred doors and walls.

It had the ultra modern touch;
The view was very free.
The trouble was there wasn't much
A man would care to see.

Many companions were around.
All had the same to say.
Each neighbor, soon or late, he found
Had come the easy way.

hands thrust into the sagging pockets of his faded raincoat which he ought to have retired five years ago. His hat was shoved back on his pale forehead so that you could see some of his limp black hair. He looked harassed and nervy and he didn't have any nerves that I ever knew of.

"I'll have some whisky," he said dispassionately. "Scotch—which is better than Irish, though it's a blasphemy to say it."

I got out the bottle of Scotch I keep firstly for O'Cassidy and only secondly because I like it myself.

"Introduce me, Dale," he said.

I told him Loretta Deslay was Loretta Deslay and that she had paid me a call.

"Yeah," he said, "I don't need you to tell me Miss Deslay has come calling on you. I got eyes. Business, or—?"

Loretta Deslay said: "I asked Mr. Bogard to do something for me. I came here to get his report."

O'Cassidy didn't put any expression on his face. It takes a whole lot of events to do that.

"I hope you got your report, Miss Deslay," he said. "What were you going to call me up about, Dale?"

"Murder," I said. "John Jesse Ruystader's."

He sipped just a little of the Scotch. "You could of told me the first time you buzzed us. I mean, you could of told us it was you calling."

"Yeah," I said, "I could. But I had to be some place else. I didn't want a delay."

"Perhaps I ought to speak, Mr.—er—"

Cass gave Loretta Deslay a fleeting smile. The way he would look when he was away from guns and morgue slab and back home playing with the five small sons his buxom Polish wife had presented to him in the first five years of their marriage.

"The name, ma'am is O'Cassidy. Rank of Detective-lieutenant, Homicide Bureau." He took a limp cigarette from a crumpled pack, lit it and dropped the match on the carpet.

Loretta Deslay said. "My half-brother is Johnnie Barkley. Johnnie hasn't been keeping very good company, Mr. O'Cassidy. I thought the only way to get him flying right would be to have Mr. Bogard throw a scare into him. Mr. Bogard said he'd try."

"Who was your half-brother running around with?" His voice cracked the question like a lash.

"I—I have reason to think he has been too friendly with a man named Milt Opal."

Cass took his cigarette from his mouth and stared at it.

"Milt Opal is a very hot character," he said. His Irish eyes crinkled slightly. "A very hot character—but one of these days I shall have him very cold indeed." He let his voice whip out again: "What was your brother doing tangling with the Opal mob?"

"I don't know." She was frightened a little now.

Cass strode across the room and dropped his scarcely begun cigarette into the fireplace. "So you went to Barkley's apartment, Dale, and instead of seeing Barkley, you see Ruystader dead in a chair?"

I nodded.

"You know you can't handle homicide, so you buzz the Department—but you're going some place so you stop off at a phone booth and put in an anonymous message?"

"I was on my way to tell Miss Deslay what had happened."

O'CASSIDY said drily: "Ruystader died around eight o'clock. You buzzed the Department before ten. It's now fifteen minutes after midnight. You've been missing for maybe a couple hours. Long time no see."

I said shortly: "There was some delay in finding Miss Deslay. I had car trouble as well."

Loretta Deslay asked: "Have you found my half-brother, Mr. O'Cassidy?"

Cass pulled his hat forward. "No," he said, "we ain't found him yet, I'm sorry to say. I mean sorry for him, too. Because if he didn't kill Ruystader, why should he take it on the lam?"

The way he said it the question didn't call for an answer, but she spoke up quickly: "Why, I don't think Johnnie ever even heard of Ruystader. Besides, Johnnie isn't a very strong character. He wouldn't dare fire a gun at anybody."

"You mean he hadn't the guts to?"

Cass said. "You trying to tell me he's maybe run away on account of he's just scared to stand and face things out? Well, he's just making it tougher for himself, if he's innocent. Because we'll get him."

He turned and walked to the door. "I'll be seein' you, Dale," he said as he went out. "Soon."

The door closed noiselessly behind him. For a moment afterwards she didn't speak. Then she came close up to me and caught my arm with her fingers. Anxiety was in her eyes.

I said: "He's playing a long shot. Thinks there's an outside chance you may know or suspect where your brother is. Then you'd warn him how things are."

Loretta went into the bedroom and fixed her face. She was gone only a few minutes. When she came back she said: "You've been very good to me." She said it with a quick smile. It was the first time I had seen her eyes smile as well as her mouth.

I said: "When do I see you again and where do you really live?"

Her face clouded again. "I don't want to tell you where I live. I'll ring you. Will that do—for now?"

Suddenly, she stood on her tip-toes and kissed my cheek. Then she was gone. I could hear her high heels tapping down the corridor.

I walked slowly into my bedroom, pulling off my tie and unbuttoning my shirt. There was a light dusting of her facepowder on the dresser. There was a little envelope, too. It had my name on it.

Inside were two twenty dollar bills and a ten.

Chapter IV

AT NINE o'clock in the morning, I woke up with an aching head. The sun was slanting through the chink in my window drapes and I knew it was going to be a lovely fall day, but I felt like a left-over goulash. But an hour later I was at my office. Three letters lay on the floor near the door. Two were obviously ads. The third looked as though it might be interesting. It was in a woman's handwriting.

Inside was one of those small faintly scented squares of expensive feminine notepaper and an address which made my eyes widen. The message was brief.

Dear Mr. Bogard—There is a matter of business I would like to discuss with you at 11 A. M. tomorrow. If you are unable to call at this address at that time please advise by telephone. Sincerely, Mrs. Arline Ruystader.

I looked at my wrist watch. Then I put the letter in my pocket, shut the office door and walked down to my car.

The Ruystader house sat back behind a driveway of its own. A cream-and-chromium Cadillac was parked there. The Homicide boys had taken their police jaloppies away. The only sign of life was a doorman. When I appeared at the big glass entrance door, he gave me a quick once-over, as if he were about to tell me where the service entrance was.

He opened the door and I said: "My name is Bogard. Mrs. Ruystader is expecting me."

Mrs. Arline Ruystader was sitting at an ivory concert grand piano. As I came through the doors she was idly rippling the opening chord sequence of the Moonlight Sonata—*sempre pianissimo e senza sordini.* I thought she probably played quite well, but would have a job keeping the jazz out of her fingertips.

She was perhaps thirty years old and probably got her clothes at Bergdorf's. They fitted her beautifully, yet there was something wrong. I realized what it was instantly. She had yet to master the art of wearing them with the casual indifference of the Upper Crust. She was just a little too conscious of their elegance. That was interesting. It indicated John Jesse Ruystader had married out of his class.

But on every other count Arline Ruystader was a very large eyeful indeed. She had perfectly straight thick black hair worn at an appropriate sophisticated length, and a face that wasn't hard to take. Her lower lip jutted fractionally, and sensuously, and she was delightfully upholstered.

"Mr. Bogard!" She used a deep, smoky voice, the accent carefully neutralized, but I

could catch the lazy drawl of Texas.

"Yeah," I said.

She came toward me with a kind of deliberate poise. "I think you will do very well indeed," she said.

"Why?"

SHE moved her head a little so that her hair slipped fetchingly over one eye.

"I form rather quick judgments of men—and slower ones of women. Women are, as a rule, rather more subtle—and less scrupulous."

I called up a crooked grin. "You mean I'm the obvious type?"

She let her long lashes flutter. "Please don't put words into my mouth. It's just that I know men. Would you like a drink?"

I not only thought I would like one, I thought I needed one. Because I was starting to like Mrs. Arline Ruystader.

We sat on a long, low davenport before a wide brick fireplace where four logs burned. She sat close enough for me to be aware of the outline of her left thigh.

I said: "What did you want to consult me about, and why did you pick me?"

She sipped some of her drink. "I picked you because I like the sound of your name."

"And you think it's come off?"

She looked up from under her fabulous eyelashes. "Now you're being vain," she said. She pursed her full lips. "I want you to find someone for me. A girl. A girl whose name I don't even know. As you may have heard, my husband has just been murdered. I believe this girl had something to do with it. I want you to find out just how she fits in."

"Do the police know about this?"

She gave a little shrug. "Of course not. What could I tell them—that I think some girl whose name I don't even know had something to do with a murder for whom they already have a suspect lined up? Anyway, I think this is a kind of delicate job that could better be done by a private detective."

I said: "What makes you think this girl is involved in the murder of your husband?"

Calmly, Mrs. Ruystader said: "She has been here. I didn't see her—except for a fleeting glimpse from the back as she left. And I think you can rule out any idea that my husband was playing around."

"You mean your husband was too old?"

If I thought my remark might make her slap my face, I was wrong. She gave a low, mellow laugh. It made me think of undulating velvet.

"That's what I like about you," she said. "I like your forthrightness. I like males who are aggressive."

I got out another cigarette to give my hands something other to do than get ideas.

"If your husband wasn't playing around, what do you suppose he was doing with this unknown girl in his house?"

Mrs. Ruystader said: "That is what I want you to find out. The police have a theory that some young man named Barkley—Johnnie Barkley—may have killed my husband. That is a name I have never heard in my life."

Suddenly I heard myself asking a question I hadn't intended. "Did you love your husband, Mrs. Ruystader?"

Quite calmly she said: "I married John for his money and he married me because he wanted to own a young woman." She paused and gave me another of those sidelong fluttering glances. "Does that shock you?"

She leaned back a little and smoothed down her elegant blouse in order to draw attention to her figure.

"I was quite fond of him. He could hardly expect love, could he?"

"I don't know what a man thinks when he gets to sixty," I said. "What do you want me to do if and when I find this mysterious girl?"

"I want you to dig up her entire background. Somewhere in that will be the clue. I feel certain of it." She looked directly at me. "What are your fees?"

"I charge clients fifty a day, plus reasonable expenses. Sometimes the latter are heavy, sometimes almost non-existent."

She said: "I'll pay you the fifty, plus even unreasonable expenses—and five hundred dollars as a bonus if you do this thing right."

Suddenly, she leaned forward so I could

feel her firm rounded breasts against my body. Her teeth were wet and glistening and her underlip and jaw jutted out. She didn't speak. I couldn't. The roof of my mouth had gone hot and dry and somebody had taken away my legs. But not my arms. I could feel them slide round her and start exerting pressure. She came slowly as though she meant to savour every second. The next thing I knew she was lying back in the cushions with all the weight of my body on her and my lips on hers. I slid my left hand in back of her waist.

Then suddenly, she thrust me away and

"Please don't take those letters. They're my bread and butter!"

stood up, looking down at me. Her breasts rose and fell and her breathing was rapid.

"I like you . . . Dale," she said. "Don't think you had to force me into what I was doing. I meant that, and more. But not now."

I stood up straightening my coat. "Well," I said, "you've fixed things nicely so that now I can't charge you a cent."

She lit a long flat cigarette with a hand that trembled. "Don't be so damned gentlemanly," she said. "Your work is strictly business. What happened just now was something else again."

I walked across the room and got my hat and coat. She touched a bell and a high yellow girl appeared to usher me off the premises.

"We'll meet again . . . soon," she said. The way she said it made Dolores Vasquez a clumsy amateur.

Then, as the door was opening, she appeared to think of something. She picked up her handbag and drew out a slim photograph. "I think this is the person you have to trace." she said. " It was among my husband's private possessions."

I looked at her, puzzled.

"I wanted to see if you'd take the case on without even a picture to help you," she explained. "You did, and that satisfied me."

She held out the print. I looked down at it for perhaps half a minute. I did that because it was worth looking at.

It was a picture of Loretta Deslay. . . .

Chapter V

IT WAS quiet in the little square. The fall sunshine made the trees a golden tracery and Morningside Park looked cool and green. I parked right outside the entrance of the Langton Apartments and walked in through the glass swing doors into the little hall.

I rang the bell of the second floor apartment that was just opposite the elevator. It took Dolores Vasquez all of thirty seconds to get the door open. What she saw didn't do her any kind of good. Her mouth shut in a long tight line and her eyes looked about as soft as marbles. This time she had clothes on.

"Well—what do you want?" If it is possible for anyone to speak through clenched teeth that was what she was doing.

I told her what I wanted. "The address of Johnnie Barkley's sister—and I want it quick."

"You can go to hell," she said. As she said it, she stepped two paces back and began closing the door.

I put one of my big feet in the crack and leaned against the side looking down at her.

"I'm not heading that way," I said. "I'm headed for the old homestead of Loretta Deslay and you're going to tell me where it is."

She grated: "I don't know any Loretta Deslay. Now will you get the hell out of here?"

She stood there with a lot of emotions chasing each other across her handsome

face. All nasty ones. Then suddenly she quit doing that. Another look came and went and, without a word, she pulled the front door wide open and stood against it, letting me in.

I walked past her into the living room and she clicked the door shut behind me. Her sofa had been moved so that its back faced me. It was deep as well as wide so that a man could sit in it and not be seen. I only saw him now because he was pushing his shoulders up against the back. He had thick black wavy hair with too much goo on it and the flesh of his neck over-rode his collar.

He said, without bothering to look around: "There's a law or something about forcing your way into a dame's apartment." The voice was heavy and lazy, but I didn't think the owner was anything more than heavy.

"There's a telephone in the room," I cracked. "Suppose you lift it and call the cops."

The shoulders rose some more. They kept right on rising until the man was standing up and turning enough so that I could see his face. It was a face I had seen once or twice before—but always at a safe distance.

He stood there with his hands driven into his coat pockets. He was nearly six feet tall. His lids were puffy and the eyes that looked out from under them were as black as coals and harder.

He was Milt Opal.

He took a hand out of his pocket and passed it reflectively over his smoothly-shaven chin. "I've seen you some place," he said.

I didn't help him.

"I got it," he said. "You used to be a newspaper reporter. Then you tangled in some murder rap and turned yourself into a private dick. Check?"

I gave a grunt.

He held the back of his hand against his mouth so that I wouldn't miss the yawn.

"A shamus," he sneered. "Okay—so what do you want, shamus?"

"An address," I answered. "I think Miss Vasquez has it."

Dolores had a hand splayed on one of her well-constructed hips. Her lips were parted a little against her white teeth. The smile on the face of the tiger.

"Baby," Milt Opal called softly, "you got an address to tell the shamus?"

She swayed toward him.

"Why don't you sock this guy in his nice, handsome mush?" she asked.

MILT OPAL told her why not. "When I hit a guy, I hit him on account of I decide it," he said.

The color flushed into her face, then went.

"Have you?" he said.

Miss Vasquez had her teeth clenched again. "Have I *what*?"

"The address this bird wants—and I don't like asking so many times."

She said: "I don't know what he's talking about."

I told Opal I was trying to trace Loretta Deslay and that she was a half-sister of Johnnie Barkley.

"Yeah?" He only breathed the word. "What's Johnnie Barkley to you?"

"I don't give a damn about Johnnie Barkley," I said. "I just want to find his sister. And I have reason to believe Miss Vasquez knows Johnnie."

"Yeah," he said slowly, "she knows Johnnie—the way you know the guard on a subway express. That's how it is, isn't it baby?"

"I've spoken to him at times," she in a low voice.

"How many times, baby?"

"Oh . . . just times. Maybe two or three. I don't know." Then she suddenly flared. "What the hell difference does it make? I can speak to Johnnie if I run across him, can't I? He's one of your—"

"Shut up!" Opal snarled the words. Then, swiftly, his voice went soft and persuasive again. "I didn't know you had ever had a couple of words with him, that's all."

Opal blew out a long thin spiral of cigarette smoke. He said: "I know Johnnie Barkley. I know him just a little. I never knew he had a sister or a half-sister."

"Well," I told him, "you know it now. The way it looked to me, I got to thinking maybe Miss Vasquez would also know he had a sister."

"I never heard of a Loretta Deslay. Sorry," she sneered.

I picked up my hat and held it low in my right hand, swinging it. "Look," I said, "suppose we quit horsing around and admit that we both know the Homicide boys want to ask Johnnie Barkley some leading questions about a very important body they found lying around in his apartment."

I was watching him as I spoke. I saw his right hand start to make a quick movement, upwards and diagonally towards his left armpit. But he stopped the movement and let his hand fall limply to his side.

Suddenly, he gave a grin. "Okay, Bogard," he said. "So we start being frank with each other. So the cops do find a big guy lying stiff in Johnnie Barkley's apartment. Where do you come in?"

"I found the body," I told him.

For a full half minute I could hear the little mantel clock ticking. It sounded as loud as a metronome.

"You get around, shamus, don't you?" Opal said at last.

"Yeah," I said, "now here, now there. But I'm not investigating the case. I'm just looking for Loretta Deslay. Johnnie Barkley comes into it only incidentally, as far as I am concerned."

He turned a long level look on me the way he might be playing a beam on something he wanted to see in every detail. Finally, he said: "I figure you're on the level, Bogard. I like your style. You got what it takes, all right."

Opal started grinning. "You waste your time gumshoeing around for peanuts," he said. "I could use your kind in my organization. You can remember it any time the gumshoe business makes your feet tired." He half-turned toward the Vasquez girl. "Get us some drinks, baby."

She flashed a look toward us. I didn't think she would try slipping me anything this time, but I wasn't taking any chances. I said: "That's all right—I'll make the drinks. I like making drinks."

I strolled across to the cocktail cabinet. There was rye, bourbon, gin, and dry vermouth. There was a bucket of ice and some soda. I started fixing a rye highball. Then I saw it. It was lying inside the cabinet, as though it had slipped down between the glasses. It was a note, and what made me stare was the fact that it was signed Johnnie. I started whistling *After You've Gone* under my breath and cocked my head a little to the side so that I could read what the sheet said while I kept my hands busy with the drinks. All I managed to read was—

. . so will stay here for the time being. Nobody seems to be watching me. Let me know how things go. I've got dough to last some time so I think. . . .

I could sense Dolores getting nearer. I caught her perfume as she swayed across the room. I turned with the drinks on a tray I had picked up and nearly knocked her over. She picked one off the tray and gave me a look. She didn't drink any of it until Opal and I were well into ours.

The short part of the letter I had read didn't mean a thing. But I had seen the address. It was 4279 Perdido Avenue, Kansas City, Mo.

Chapter VI

THE tabloid I used to work on has its steel and concrete tower downtown near where the Avenue of the Americas flows into Canal Street. I was on my way there. I wanted to see Wes Delaney, which was something I ought to have done before. Loretta Deslay had said she knew Wes. Wes was the one who had sent her to me.

I was lucky. He was in. He had his coat off and his collar unbuttoned and was batting out some copy on an ancient Underwood.

He looked up as I walked over to him.

"Hi, Dale!" he grinned. "Long time no see."

"Sorry—I've been busy."

"Yeah," he said. "I read your book. Do you have fun?"

"Like me to buy you a drink out of the profits?" I said.

"Why not?" He fed another sheet into the typewriter. "Give me five minutes and I can take a lunch break without losing my job."

He ran both hands through his crisp hair, then started hitting the keys again. Wes Delaney used to be a Hearst reporter in the Windy City. He blew into New York a couple of decades ago along with the lean, hard times everyone said we weren't going to have, and had never been back to Chicago.

There was a little beer parlor around the corner where they dished up hamburgers you could trust, and Delaney and I didn't speak much until we were sitting at the bar. Then I told him about how I was hunting the address of a girl with red hair.

"Her name is Loretta Deslay and you sent her to me at Marty Alton's last night because she wanted a private eye to take a message to her brother."

Wes looked at me over the top of his beer. "If," he said, "you're working for her you ought to know her address."

"She gave me one," I answered, "but it was a phony."

He raised his bushy eyebrows a little. Maybe an inch and a half.

I went on: "She didn't want me to know where she lived. She said she had some sort of reason. I didn't find out what it was."

"Didn't you ask her brother?"

"Her brother," I said slowly, "is a slim young guy by the name of Johnnie Barkley."

The way he took that I thought that if his eyebrows went any higher they'd get lost in his hair.

"So," he said, "you're tangling with homicide again. O'Cassidy will figure you're the jinx that gums up his play. Is Loretta Deslay implicated in the murder?"

"I don't know. What was the address you were going to tell me—or were you?"

Wes used his free hand to rough up his hair once more. "I don't know," he said. "I met her at some night spot. Somebody introduced me to her. She asked my advice because she heard I was a newspaperman and she thought I would have a lot of contacts. But I do know where she works. She has some kind of secretarial job at the Merchants Banking Trust somewhere around Nassau Street." He gave me a sudden curious look. "That help, Dale?"

"Yeah," I said slowly, "I think it does."

There was a phone booth over in the corner. I looked up the number of the Merchants Trust and gave it a whirl.

"I would like to speak to Miss Deslay," I said when I got an answer.

"Loretta Deslay?"

"Yeah," I said, "Loretta Deslay."

There was a pause, and then the voice said, "I'm sorry, sir, but Miss Deslay is no longer with us. She left about a week ago."

I tried an angle. "My name is Bogard," I said. "Dale Bogard. I am a private detective with the District Attorney's license to operate. I'd like to have her home address."

"Even if it weren't against the rules to give out addresses, sir," came back her prim answer, "I couldn't help you. We understand that Miss Deslay has left New York."

"Thanks a lot," I said. "But where has she gone—or is that against the rule book, too?"

"Miss Deslay didn't confide. Sorry."

"I'll bet you are," I said.

I walked back to the bar. Wes Delaney quizzed me with his eyes. I told him what had happened.

"So you draw a blank," he said. "What comes next?"

I tipped my seat back a little and gave him one of those expressionless looks.

"Kansas City," I said.

I GRABBED the last seat on a Constellation out of La Guardia, my pajamas and shaving junk crammed into a brief case, and I was in time to have dinner in Kansas City. Then I left the Muehlebach, where I'd checked in, and headed for 4279 Perdido Avenue.

It was a long narrow street of walk-up apartment houses, hamburger stands, taffy joints, board-front poolrooms and a number of shambling old cribs with euphemistic "Rooms to Let" signs in their windows. A thin drizzle was falling and a west wind

rustled pieces of paper along the sidewalk until they became a soggy mass and slumped dispiritedly into the gutter.

There was a single naked light burning over the scabrous entrance to 4279. I walked up the dirty steps and thrust open the door. I was in a small square hall. A door on my right opened into an office of sorts. At a table, clutching a half-empty gin bottle, was a scrawny man with no hair and a loose underslung lip. He was coatless and the hand that lay aslant the table-top trembled continuously.

He said, tonelessly: "You want sumpin' mister?"

"I'm calling on a guest," I told him.

A sudden anxious look flickered across his face. "We ain't done nothin' wrong—"

I leaned against the rickety door and stared down at him. "I'm not a cop," I said. "I'm looking for someone I know. He's staying here."

He reached for the gin bottle and poured himself a slug. Not a very big one. Not more than a half pint.

"What guy is it?"

I said: "Maybe we'll just say he's a slim blond buy—in his twenties. He's been here only a day."

"Ain't no birds like that here. What you trying to pull?"

Suddenly, I reached down and yanked him out of his seat. I got the long ends of his open collar into my hand and twisted them until there was pressure against his Adam's apple. His head jerked backward, then forward until his shiny store teeth clicked under the impact.

"Don't beat me up, mister, please. I ain't done nothin'. I couldn't take a—a—"

I pushed him back into his seat and let him see the butt of my underarm Luger.

"Okay, Dad—now give."

He got both hands inside his collar and spread it out, his breath coming in wheezy gulps.

"There's a bird sumpin' like the one you said got a room on the third floor. A quiet guy. Ain't hardly been out of his room since he checked in."

"Okay—get going," I said.

"You could go on up yourself."

"Yeah, and maybe have somebody sap me from behind after you've had a little talk. Be your age, Dad."

He shrugged, led the way out of the dingy office, across the hall and up the stairs.

We stopped halfway down the third-floor corridor.

"That's his room," he said.

I knocked on the door, then knocked again. I shrugged and twisted the knob. The door swung inward, revealing a dark room.

"Must be sleepin', mister." Dad's wheezy voice was close to my ear and the gin fumes came at me in waves.

I took out the Luger and flicked off the safety-catch. Then I put one hand round the door, felt for the switch and thumbed it.

Another of those naked bulbs came on and shed light on an empty room. Near the window was an iron bedstead roughly made up, but no one was in it.

"You sure he didn't go out?"

"S'funny. I been in my office three-four hours. I ain't seen him. Maybe—"

There was a door on the right-hand side of the room, opposite the window. I knew *he* was behind it, the way you know some things without seeing.

I twisted the knob and I was looking into a clothes closet. A deep one like they have in old-fashioned houses and this was an old-fashioned house.

A man was in the closet. He had been kneeling on the dirty floor until his tortured muscles had started screaming for relief. That was when he had begun moving, and the wire cable which trussed his hands and ankles behind him had been fed around his neck in a loop so that as he moved he slowly strangled himself.

He was blond and slim. There was no other clue. Because he no longer had the boyishly dissolute face he possessed in life. Or any other kind of face.

I was glad Loretta Deslay was not going to have to identify him for a little while.

Chapter VII

THE drunk who kept the rooming house began to cry. Soon he would become hysterical and start screaming. I didn't want

any part of this setup. I wanted out.

For the dead blond boy there was nothing I could do. Maybe he wasn't a strong or admirable character, but this was no way for anyone to die. He had rolled over on his side with the cable biting into him and his tongue was down below his chin. There were no clothes in the closet. There was nothing in the closet except—

I saw it when I bent over him a little. It was almost beneath him. A torn segment of gabardine cloth, no larger than a postage stamp. It had ripped loose when a man's sleeve had been momentarily caught by the wire. It had probably happened when he was trussing Johnnie Barkley.

I stashed the little piece of cloth in a pocket, walked to the window. It was partly open, because this was the way the killer went out. It was the way out for me, too. I don't think the sobbing lush even saw me go.

Back at my hotel's bar, I ordered a double Scotch.

I stood against the bar drinking that promised double Scotch and taking in the warmth and the lights and the whole climate of ease and luxury. In that setting you got the sudden crazy feeling that you hadn't just seen a dead boy with wire round his neck. Then you knew you had and your hands felt sticky.

Two doubles later I began to feel a little better. Enough to start thinking. But what I thought was nothing to do with who killed Johnnie Barkley. I was remembering that Loretta Deslay was reported to have left New York and I figured she was probably coming by rail here to Kansas City.

I finished my drink and moved out to the desk. It was just a chance.

"I am a friend of Miss Loretta Deslay, of New York," I said. "I understand she has a reservation here—"

The clerk looked in the book.

"Yes, sir. We expect Miss Deslay this evening."

I held on to the desk top. I'm not used to such easy success.

"You happen to know what time she'll get in?" I tried to make the query sound casual.

"She didn't advise us, sir. But there's a section of the Super-Chief due at nine."

I looked at my watch. It told me I had half an hour to wait.

I WAS waiting at the track gate trying to spot Loretta Deslay as she came through the crowd. I didn't have any trouble. There would have to be something wrong with a guy who could miss that magnificent red hair, and the V-cut black blouse. She had her topcoat slung over one arm. One small, expensive pigskin case was in the other hand.

I said: "Hello . . . Loretta."

When I spoke I was right up alongside her. She turned, stopped rigidly where she was and a fat guy bumped into her from behind, moving off to the side with mumbled apologies which he damn well didn't mean.

Her eyes were wide open and her lips were parted a little against those white even teeth. I thought I had given her a shock. Then the hard look flickered off her face.

"Why . . . it's you." And again that softly musical voice. "You turn up everywhere, don't you, Mr. Bogard?"

I took her bag and steered her out on the plaza, where we got a cab.

Loretta settled back and gave me a dark sidelong glance.

"Are you taking charge of my life?"

"Just for tonight," I said.

"How did you know I was coming here and how did you know I was checking in at the Muehlebach?"

I told her. There was something else I was going to have to tell her pretty damn quick.

I paid off the taxi and prowled about the lobby while she went up to fix her face and leave her things. There were a lot of people around and most of them turned their heads as she came across toward me. The men's faces had one kind of look and the women's had another, but if Loretta knew about it she didn't give a sign.

I flipped out a cigarette and lit it. I took rather long about it.

"Something on your mind, Mr. Bogard?"

Suddenly, I heard myself saying: "Would you like to go some place for a drink?" I

hadn't meant to say that, but I didn't want to tell her what I had to tell her in a busy hotel lobby.

"Anything you say, Mr. Bogard."

We walked out on to the street. It was one of those summery nights you sometimes get in the fall. Just off Southwestern I walked her down four steps and we pushed our way into a little bar with a horseshoe-counter. The music was solid but it wasn't noisy. A stoutly handsome colored girl was singing the blues.

My daddy rocks me
With a steady roll . . .

She didn't roll her eyes and gesture. She just stood there letting those blues come out because that was the way she was feeling. The gin-mill piano was just a little off key, the way it should be, and the trumpet-clarinet counterpoint had that contrived dissonance, too.

She said, as the band faded: "Why are you in Kansas City, Mr. Bogard?"

I began to tell her then. "I played a hunch that Johnnie had taken it on the lam and had come on out here."

Again that flicker crossed her face. "I see—and you believed I would come out here to him?"

I ground out my cigarette-butt and said, without looking at her. "I've found Johnnie."

Her hand was lying on the table. I saw it clench.

"Yes?" She said the word in a tiny voice.

"He was dead."

She went on sitting there, saying nothing and not seeing me. If there was an expression on her face I didn't know what it was. Then suddenly, she was seeing again. One of her top teeth sunk into her long scarlet lip and held it pinned.

"He had been murdered," I said.

Now her eyes were clear and dry and her mouth was set in a long hard line.

"Who killed him?"

"I don't know," I said. "I went back to Dolores Vasquez' apartment. Milt Opal was there. We had a talk. Before I left I saw

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

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part of a letter your half-brother wrote to her. The few words I managed to read meant nothing, but I saw the address. The letter came from Kansas City. Then I heard you had left New York. The rest you can figure out."

"The Opal gang killed him. They killed him because he must have known something and—"

"And they got to figuring he might be unreliable."

I told her then. How I had found him. How there was nothing more anyone could do. How I had left by the window.

SUDDENLY, she put both her hands to her face. Her shoulders moved a little. I hadn't expected it. But I wasn't sure what I had expected.

Her eyes were a little red when I saw them again, but they still weren't wet.

I said: "Why haven't you ever told me where you live?"

"I was frightened all the time of the Opal gang," she answered simply. "I wanted to save Johnnie—and I didn't want anyone to be in a position to give anything away, even unwittingly."

"I think you can tell me now without being bothered," I said.

She told me her address then. It was a little place down on West Tenth Street, where she lived alone.

I gave her a cigarette. She got out a little pearl and silver lighter and spun the tiny flame, holding it out to me. I dragged on the Lucky and said: "I found out you worked for Ruystader—in his office."

She went on smoking. Then: "Yes—that was how I came to be out at his place. He wanted me to take some notes in connection with a deal he was working on."

The band started in again, but it was playing low down, just the guitar, bass and drums establishing a rhythmic beat behind the pianist.

So I could hear her say: "My family is distantly related to the Ruystader's." She gave a little flush. "Poor relations, I guess. That's how come I came by the job. When he died I didn't want to stick around. I wanted to be independent again. I don't really like to have to take—charity."

The big colored gal had moved out front of the band again and was going into those *Empty Bed Blues.* She sang it as though she meant it, but I didn't think her bed would be empty when she didn't want it that way. The air was full of smoke and subdued conversation, but her voice came through it as clear as a bell.

Another voice came through, too. A breathy voice pitched a little too high for a man and yet I knew it wasn't a woman's. It spoke close behind my ear.

"Don't look round. Don't make even a little turn. Just listen." Something hard was pressing against my back.

"I'm listening," I said.

"You ain't been in Kaycee long, bub. But don't stick around long. Don't go looking for no guy who might or might not be here."

"What guy should I be looking for?" I asked.

I could see Loretta Deslay staring at the man behind me. He must have figured she was a pick-up, or he wouldn't have let her see his face.

The breathy, high-pitched voice went on: "I wouldn't know that. If I knew, I wouldn't be saying. But there's a midnight train to New York. I want you to be riding on that train, bub." The gun pressed more firmly into the small of my back.

"I flew here," I said. "I've got a ticket back."

There was a little pause. "Okay—you can fly. When you leave here, beat it right back to your hotel. Play it that way and maybe you'll get to live to a nice comfortable old age. Who knows?"

He reached out a hand to drop his cigarette into the table tray. It was a powerful hand and the ring on his third finger carried a piece of near-ice as big as a marble.

But what interested me more was a tiny tear on the cuff of his gabardine jacket. . . .

Chapter VIII

I FLEW back to New York alone. They would be watching the air terminal and it would be safer for Loretta Deslay not to

be seen with me. She caught the morning train out of K.C. I was in New York many hours ahead of her.

It was about five in the afternoon. The sun was shining but there was that lively tang in the Manhattan air. I went to my apartment, showered, shaved, then got my car and drove downtown. There was time to do what I wanted to do before dinner. Maybe it was something I should have thought of earlier—but the Ruystader case hadn't grown on me then.

Now it had. There were too many things I wanted to know. I was doing sums in my head and getting all the wrong answers. It was time I started getting some of them nearly right.

I rode up to the newspaper office editorial floor, turned into the morgue. I got out all the filed clippings on John Jesse Ruystader as though I still worked there. The file told me John Jesse Ruystader was Boston, though the family had long ceased to live in the Louisburg Square haunt of the true Brahmins and had, in fact, moved into New York when the Ruystader financial interests began to soar. That was around the end of World War I.

Ruystader had gone to Yale, then to Oxford, had taken the European tour which was fashionable in his youth and had gone into finance when he came back. No other Ruystader had done that. For more than a hundred years the prim, Puritanical family had lived on inherited wealth—but the springs had begun to run dry. John Jesse Ruystader filled them up again.

It took me twenty minutes to dig up that. I spent the next hour back-tracking through the musty file looking for something. For what? I didn't know. But somewhere in Ruystader's past was a clue to what was happening right now in New York—and Kansas City. There had to be a clue.

I quit reading the file and began looking at the old newspaper pix. There was one of him as a major in France, looking very young. I went on leafing through the stuff. Then, suddenly, I stopped. I was looking down at one of those candid-camera shots the photoflash girls sometimes take in night spots. This one showed a man and a young woman leaning across the table very *tête-à-tête*. The man was John Jesse Ruystader. The girl was someone I had never seen. But I knew the face. I had seen one like it—on somebody else. . . .

The caption didn't say who she was. But there was a chance the newspaper still had the original print. They found it for me. Still not faded, but cracked a little across the center. I turned it over. The cameraman had typed a little slip and stuck it on. It said the girl who was with Ruystader all those years back was Kathryn Deslay, a Broadway showgirl.

I rode the elevator down to street level. I spent the next twenty minutes in City Hall—and at the end of it I knew that Kathryn Deslay married John Lester Barkley of Long Island City on May 23, 1926.

THE house was off Vernon Boulevard. An old rambling house. The kind in which people used to bring up large families and didn't live on their nerve-ends. The iron railing out front had rusted and the big oaken door didn't have a bell. I used the knocker.

When I didn't get any response from inside the house I tried the doorknob. It turned. I leaned against the panels and the door moved heavily inward. I stepped into the hall and stood there a moment, adjusting myself to the gloom.

There was a door on the right. It was open a little, a light burning inside. I moved across the hall and pushed the door open.

I looked into a big room with the lace curtains pulled to over the tall, old-style window. There was a heavy bed with brass posters. A woman was in the bed and I knew she was Kathryn Deslay Barkley.

She was wearing a cotton nightdress and one arm rested limply on the covers. Her hair that once had been blonde was silvery in the light from the bedside lamp, but it was still thick and hung in long plaits. Her eyes were feverish and her skin had a pallor I had seen before in hospitals. I knew she was dying.

I walked across the room and took her hand in mine. It burned against my touch.

Slowly, her eyes focused on me. She had

never seen me in her life, but she was too near death to be frightened.

I said: "I'm Dale Bogard. I have come to call on you on a matter which concerns your family. But it can wait. I'll get you a doctor—"

Her fingers gripped mine. She moved her lips. I had to bend low to hear the words.

"No—not now. They can't do any more for me now. . . ."

I found some brandy on a drèsser in the corner of the room. I got my arm under her frail shoulders and cradled her while she drank a little of it.

I lifted her against the pillows. She lay there, her breath coming in gasps. Then she became quieter. Now there was a little color in her face.

She had a low musical voice. "I took ill five days ago. I looked after myself. I thought it was just a chill. I live here alone. Then I got worse. I couldn't summon help. I—just lay here. . . ."

"Didn't your—" I began, but she cut in. Her eyes had something more than fever in them.

"You mean—Johnnie? Have you seen him?"

She was dying of pneumonia. I couldn't tell her. I said: "Yes—the other evening."

"Was he well?"

"Yeah," I said. "He was very well when I saw him. Perhaps a little worried."

Her face softened. "Yes," she whispered. "Johnnie always did get into trouble, but—but I loved him. Nice boys go wrong sometimes, Mr. Bogard."

I nodded.

"Tell me," I said, "was John Jesse Ruystader ever anything to you?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes—but that was all long ago." For a moment her eyes lost their fevered look and misted over. "We were to have been married."

"What went wrong?"

Now she was speaking almost to herself. "It was his family. They didn't approve. They sent him away. He never knew—"

"He never knew you had his child?"

"I couldn't bring myself to tell him. I—I had that much pride."

"A little girl, wasn't it?" I asked.

"Yes. She was very beautiful. I called her Loretta." She half raised herself in the bed and reached toward the bedside table. Her hand came back with an album. She gave it to me, open.

It was an old snapshot picture of a child of about four. She had a pale oval face and long hair which could be red. A very pretty little girl.

Mrs. Barkley's hand was still in mine. That was how I knew it had suddenly tightened. She made a little sound with her lips. I dropped the picture and bent low over her. Her body gave a sudden movement, then fell back. Her eyes were closed and the tired, lined face looked at peace.

I thought she had probably been trying to tell me something more about Johnnie and Loretta, the children who had gone out into the world and never understood that she was lonely and sick and was soon to die.

Now she could never tell me.

Chapter IX

ABSENT-MINDEDLY I walked down the worn steps to the street. That was why I didn't see the giant until it was too late. He was standing on the sidewalk and as I got there he pointed the longest knife in the world just above my belt. He let the point pierce a little hole in my shirt so I could just feel the steel. His hand was yellow. This was because he was a Chinese and I didn't know they came as big as that.

He was not more than six feet seven and would weigh about two hundred and forty without his size twelve shoes. His face might have been carved out of solid sandstone and had about the same expression. I decided I didn't like him.

"Come!" He said in a boy soprano.

He let his left arm slide round my shoulders and exerted a little pressure.

"I'm coming," I croaked.

He reached inside my jacket, came out with the Luger. He broke the gun, ejected the shells, dropped them in his pocket and pushed the gun back in my underarm holster.

My car was at the curb and he seemed to know it was mine.

He said woodenly: "You sit. I drive."

We got into the car. He drove north, then made a right-hand turn. He didn't drive far before he shoved his foot on the brake and slewed the car into a side-street.

Just ahead of us was a big shiny Lincoln. A slim, dark-featured guy wearing a chauffeur uniform sat at its wheel smoking a cigarette. He came alive when we pulled up behind him. He came around and pulled the door of my Buick open.

"Out," he said.

I got out. The way you do when a giant is immediately in back of you with a dagger and another guy is in front of you with a .38 Smith and Wesson.

The chauffeur let his left hand slide into his pocket and come out with a pair of chrome-steel cuffs. He slipped them on me, and prodded me over to the Lincoln.

"You can sit in the back," he said. "You'll be more comfortable there."

A sliding glass partition isolated me from him.

He shut the door, turned to the giant.

"You follow us in his car, Lee," he said.

"No relation to the general?" I cracked.

"Ah, I see—a joke," he said. "No, his name is Lee Chang. He is a very faithful servitor, if perhaps a little slow."

"Thanks for telling me, Sonny Boy," I said sourly.

"The name is nothing so vulgarly American," he said coldly. "It is Philip Aramais. My great-grandfather was a French aristocrat."

"I hope his head fell under the guillotine," I snarled.

A little wintry smile visited his dark face for a moment. "It did," he said.

Then he was sliding back into the driving-seat and turning in a wide arc to head back on to the main highway. He drove hard and fast, heading due east. I could see the giant keeping on our tail all the way. We crossed the line into Nassau, turning almost northeast to drive high up on a shoulder which juts out into Long Island Sound.

Night was falling and there were few lights. Tall trees rustled in the gloom as we sped down a narrow black-top road. Then, suddenly, I saw it. It swirled toward us out of the night mists like a crazy castle in a Disney spectacle. Tall conical turrets rose at each end and the undraped windows looked like the black unseeing sockets of the blind.

We went into a winding driveway between two rotted gateposts from which the gates had either been removed—or, more likely, fallen. We stopped at the stone stairs of the main entrance.

Aramais took the handcuffs off my wrists and walked neatly up the steps. He kept me just ahead of him and the giant plodded in the rear. Then we were walking into a square hall where a dozen mounted horses were ranged along two walls. The dummy riders wore full armor and each had his lance thrusting upward and outward. I thought the third one down on the right was getting ready to charge me, but I could be wrong.

At the far end of the hall Aramais pushed me through a huge door, made a swift turn down a corridor and stopped in front of a third and smaller door. He tapped on it gently.

"Come in." The voice which spoke was high and harsh. It was a woman's voice.

THE ROOM was wide and if there was a ceiling you couldn't see it in the gloom. The block floor was the color of dark red blood and was strewn with faded rugs. Dead lilies drooped from a vase on a refectory table. A woman sat in a high-backed chair beside it.

A massive jeweled dogcollar circled her throat and the hand which lay extended on the chairarm was weighted down with jeweled rings. Her skin had the curious dead quality of parchment hidden long centuries from the sun and her gray lifeless hair was piled on her head. Only the eyes were alive.

She said in that high and harsh voice: "I am Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader. The last of the Ruystaders."

"Good evening, Mr. Ruystader," I heard a voice saying. It had to be my voice because no one else had spoken, but I had never heard the voice before.

Her carmined lips twisted in a tiny smile.

"Not Mrs. Ruystader," she said. "I never married, though I am eighty-six years old."

If there was any comeback to that I didn't know what it was.

"Come closer, young man—I want to look at you."

I moved in some. She turned her eyes upward to mine. We stayed like that a long time.

Finally, she sighed.

"You have courage—that means it will take a little longer."

She took her ringed hand off the chair arm and let the fingers of her other hand caress the rings.

"Your name is Dale Bogard. You are a private investigator who also uses his experiences as background material for books. You are at present engaged in investigating matters concerned with the death of John Jesse Ruystader. I am correct in all this, am I not?"

"Uh-huh," I said.

Her mouth shut in a long line, then opened. About a third of an inch. "You will please answer me in English. I do not allow vulgar colloquialisms in this house."

"Very well," I said, "you are correct in your assumptions." I could sense the giant and his little boy friend in the shadows behind me.

Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader smiled. You could almost hear the parchment crack. She reached down with her left hand and came up with a cat. I hadn't seen it before because it was hidden under the folds of her gown. It was a big cat with golden fur, green eyes and pure white whiskers. She settled it in her lap and let her long bony fingers explore it gently until the cat began to purr.

"He is more beautiful than anything that lives," she said. She spoke in a low croon as though to herself. I knew she was not quite sane.

Suddenly, she stopped making the cat purr. It curled up in her lap and began to sleep. She said: "I wish you to cease investigating any matters connected with the death of John Jesse Ruystader."

"How did you know I was investigating them?" I asked.

"My dear Mr. Bogard, I take a very close interest in the family well-being. There is nothing left in life for me except the name of the Ruystaders. I do not want it besmirched by some interfering private detective."

"Why should the apprehension of Ruystader's murderer do harm to his name?" I asked.

"I have not had you followed and brought here to ask me questions, Mr. Bogard. I am asking them of you. I am telling you that I do not wish you to continue with your inquiries. That is all!" She said it with the inflection of a woman who has never had her word questioned.

I said, evenly: "I have been engaged by John Jesse Ruystader's wife to help find a clue to the murder. She—"

I STOPPED because the face below me was suddenly contorted. A long purple vein pulsated down the side of her neck and a little froth bubbled on her dreadful painted lips. She had difficulty in speaking. When she succeeded, her voice had become a screech.

"Don't use that woman's name to me. That—that—" She used a rapid succession of words. They came strictly from below the gutter line. She went on: "That woman will not inherit a cent. I shall challenge the will."

I said: "Look, I'm supposed to be doing the family a service. Why is it you want me to lay off?"

"I do not wish your investigation, therefore you will not do it."

"I'll decide that one," I said. I was getting a little too much of the last of the Ruystaders.

A tiny smile played around the ends of her long mouth.

"You are wrong there, Mr. Bogard."

Something struck me then. "What was John Jesse Ruystader to you?"

"He was my nephew. I am the surviving sister of his father."

Thoughts were beginning to chase themselves through my mind. I followed them along. "Why didn't John marry until he was sixty?"

"His father and mother did not wish it," she said in a funny brittle little tone.

I let my mouth twist itself into cynicism. "You mean *you* didn't."

She said, without any show of emotion: "You are an intelligent young man. Yes, I was primarily instrumental in preventing John from making a fool of himself."

"I bet his mother loved having you around," I jeered at her.

Now there was emotion on her raddled face. "That puling thing," she said contemptuously. "Frances wasn't a Ruystader. I was not disposed to allow her to influence the life of any blood-member of this family."

I got out a cigarette and blew smoke at the ceiling. I couldn't be sure whether I made it.

"So John was kept in his place until his parents died?" I mused. "But he got out of line once, didn't he?"

Her freezing eyes focused and held mine. "What is it you know, Mr. Bogard?"

"It was a long time back, wasn't it?" I said. "There was a girl. Her name was Kathryn Deslay."

Only the throbbing vein betrayed her emotion. "What exactly do you know about Kathryn Deslay?" Beyond the pool of yellow light the shadows seemed to be moving.

I said: "I know he once went with a girl by that name. I was doing some research for Mrs. Ruystader. I saw an old newspaper picture which showed him with this girl."

As I finished her vein stopped jumping and the breath came out of her mouth in a dry little whistling sound. It could have been a sigh of relief.

When she spoke again her voice was composed, almost pleasant. "That was all long ago, Mr. Bogard. The young woman was not a suitable match for a Ruystader to contract. John never saw her again."

"No women he picked would have measured up, would she?" I said. There was something else I wanted to ask—something I had to know—but I knew this was not the time to ask it. Not if I ever wanted to leave this house on my feet.

Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader went on: "So you see what I mean, Mr. Bogard? Already you are beginning to uncover long-dead skeletons in our ancient cupboard. Skeletons that were better left—*to rot!*"

"Yeah," I said. "I can see how it all stacks up for you—"

She leaned forward slightly. "Then, Mr. Bogard, may I take it that you will comply with my request?"

"I don't make any promises," I said.

"Not even to your clients, Mr. Bogard?"

"You don't come into that classification."

"I could," she said softly. "I suppose you have your price?"

"Yeah," I said. "Fifty a day, plus expenses. Want to bid it up some?"

"I will write you a check for ten thousand dollars in return for your signed statement that you will neither inquire further into this matter nor speak of it to a living soul."

I went on standing there and not seeing her because I was trying to do some figuring in my head. On ten grand you can do a lot of figuring and it all adds up to ten grand.

But I finally got the right answer.

"No sale," I said.

MARIE-ELIZABETH RUYSTADER didn't speak. She made a little gesture with an upraised finger. The shadows moved in on me then. Only they ceased to be shadows. I knew that when I felt myself being lifted off the floor. The giant didn't lift me very high. Not more than three inches. Then he held me against his body, his enormous arms wrapped round me and the hard contours of his jaw pressed down on the top of my head.

Phillip Aramais stood in front of me. "Lower your right arm just a little, Lee," he said. "It is in the way."

I could feel the giant do that. Then Aramais made a quick movement. So quick it hardly seemed to happen. But I knew it had when his balled fist hit me an inch above my belt. I didn't think he had hit me with everything he had. It would be much later when he did that. All that happened to me now was that I sucked air in agony and immediately wanted to bend bouble.

Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader lay back in her chair, her hands clasping and unclasping. "You see, Mr. Bogard, we have means of enforcing our will on the reluctant. It will

be pleasing to witness your disintegration."

Aramais fitted a leather work glove on his hand. When he hit me high up on the cheek he turned his fist downward. The impact would have jerked my head back if there had been anywhere for it to jerk. But since there wasn't, the blow ripped a long gash. I could feel the blood slide down between my collar and my neck. It was round this time that I ceased to believe in the essential brotherhood of man.

Something was sliding down Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader's chin, too. Only it wasn't blood. It was a little trickle of saliva.

"Now," she breathed, "the whip. The long punishment whip."

Aramais bowed, retreated. The giant threw me face downward on the floor. I rolled over on my side. He didn't try to stop me. If I started anything all he had to do was take one kick at my ribs and I wouldn't have any ribs.

"In a moment," said the woman, "in a moment I will ask Lee to remove your coat and shirt."

I could see the big cat was still asleep in her lap. She wasn't holding it. I knew then what I had to do. I rolled over on to my face, groaning and mumbling to myself. The movement brought me near enough to her knees to make a sudden snatch. I made it just as Aramais came in through the door.

As I got the cat in my hands I leaped upward and sideways, standing on the rim of the pool of light.

The giant lumbered forward. Then stopped. He stopped because Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader told him to stop.

That was the word she used. She screamed it. She half-rose from her chair, swaying, her hands clawing at the air.

Then her voice fell and a babble of words tore from her.

"Tamil, Tamil, my lovely Tamil! Give him back to me! I—"

I held the cat in both hands and both hands were around its neck.

"You are going to stand there and watch me strangle Tamil," I said. "Unless—"

I could see Aramais slide a gun from under his arm. I held the cat up, slowly choking it. I could feel its body writhe in my hands as they tightened.

Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader began screaming again.

"Don't shoot, Phillip! He's killing my beautiful Tamil! Don't make him—"

Aramais let the gun hang low in his hand.

I said: "Drop that gun and we can talk."

There wasn't even a flicker of expression on his saturnine features as he dropped it to the rug.

I stopped strangling the cat, held it close against me with one hand gripping the fur on its neck so that it couldn't scratch.

Then I jerked my Luger out, tossed it to him.

"Put some shells in it," I snarled. "Your pal has them in his pocket."

He got the shells off the giant, fed them into the gun, snapped the safety catch.

"Now," I said, "toss it back. So that it drops at my feet."

He did that. I bent slowly, got the Luger and stood up. I held the cat in one hand, looked at Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader.

"Catch, baby," I said.

As I spoke I slung Tamil across to her. She caught him and held him against her bosom, mouthing little incoherent idiocies. She was no longer aware of anything except the cat.

I flicked off the safety-catch, moved a little to the side.

"Get in the center," I said. "You, too, big boy."

They stood close together, the giant accepting everything without a shadow of emotion, Aramais dark, unsmiling—and full of hate.

I stepped back a pace, reached down with my free hand and picked up the whip he had brought in. It was long and black and thonged.

"Nice people," I said. But I don't think he heard what I said. What he heard was the little swish of the whiplash. He didn't hear it fast enough to dodge and one of the thongs cut him diagonally across his pale face.

Then I tossed the thing into a corner.

"That about evens our score," I told him.

Hig gun was still on the rug. I dropped it into my coat pocket.

"Good-by, nice people," I said.

I backed slowly to the door. Then I was through it, locking it behind me.

Out on the drive I got the hood of the big black Lincoln up and removed the rotor of the distributor. In another half-minute I had the motor of my Buick going and was rolling down the drive.

The driveway entrance was wide. That was why the incoming car was able to pass me abreast. A woman was driving it. Because she was heavily veiled I could not see her face.

But she had perfectly straight thick black hair worn at shoulder-length and the way she sat, she looked tall. Not less than five feet nine inches tall.

I didn't stop. . . .

Chapter X

O'CASSIDY was waiting in my apartment when I got back. He had his hat on the back of his head and a tall glass in his hand. I had a patch on my cut face, thanks to the corner druggist.

"Hiya, Dale," he said. He didn't turn.

"More licensed larceny by the Police Department," I said bitterly. "And I have to pay taxes to keep you in your job. I don't like my beer stock being depleted by dicks from the Homicide Bureau."

"I couldn't find any whisky."

I grinned. "I keep it locked," I said. "Want some?"

Cass made a slow turn then, walked into the center of the living room and rested one long thigh on a chair arm.

"Yeah," he said, "I think so. I also think I should ask where you've been these last two days. Not been on a nice long train ride?"

"Should I have been?"

"I'm asking, Dale." He said it softly. "Nice rooms they have at the Muehlenbach in Kaycee."

I let that one drift with the off-shore current, but Cass had his landing-net out. He said: "You didn't stop long, did you?"

"All right," I said, "I'll give. Mrs. Arline Ruystader hired me to trace a girl whose name she doesn't know but who she thinks may have been implicated in some way in the recent past of her late husband. The signs suggested that Loretta Deslay, who was also a client of mine until lately, might be just that person. The signs also suggested that Johnnie Barkley had taken it on the lam out to Kansas City—so I went there to ask him all about his half-sister, whom I couldn't contact here."

"Go on, Dale," said Cass in that soft voice.

"I finally traced Johnnie Barkley to a sleazy rooming house where I found him very dead." I started to go into details.

O'Cassidy said: "Yeah—I know what they did to him. It looks like a gang killing."

"That's how I figured it," I told him.

"Yeah, I guess maybe you did. But you didn't think it necessary to tell the police."

"No," I said, "I didn't. I couldn't help them. All I did was find the body. It would have been found soon anyway. I couldn't even identify him. And I had a client in New York."

O'Cassidy hung a limp hand-rolled cigarette in his mouth and struck a match. "To hell with the client," he said. "That drunk who runs the rooming house told the Kaycee police a man found the body and then beat it. He didn't give much of a description, but I had a hunch it might be you."

"Okay," I said resignedly, "what are you going to do?"

"Nothing." Cass gave me one of those fleeting grins of his. "I got my own axe to grind. I ain't doing this on account of you're a friend of mine. I wouldn't deviate from the strict path of duty for my own mother-in-law—if I didn't expect to gain something for myself and the Department."

I unlocked a little cabinet and hauled out a bottle of Scotch. Cass watched while I filled his glass to the halfway mark.

"I just want your word that finally we get all the information and all the help we need in the death of John Jesse Ruystader." He drank his whisky, stood up, buttoning his faded topcoat. "One thing I will tell you—five hundred thousand dollars of Ruystader's private balance have been withdrawn in the last twelve months and gone nobody knows where."

I said: "Maybe Johnnie Barkley was

blackmailing Ruystader. Maybe Barkley stashed away the dough, took it on the lam and the killers went right after him."

Cass turned with his hand on the doorknob. "You left a lot of gaps in that diagnosis," he said drily. "Yeah—you did. And you didn't bother to say who clouted you there under the eye, either."

IT WAS nine forty-five and I didn't think Loretta Deslay would be in, but she was. She answered the phone herself.

"I saw your mother early this evening," I said. I caught a little sound. The kind a girl might make if she took her breath in sharply and suddenly.

I let my voice soften. "She died while I was there," I said.

"Oh! Oh! Dale, I—"

"I'm sorry," I said. "She had been ill with pneumonia for five days. There was nothing I could do." I thought for a moment. "When did you see her last?"

"Two weeks ago," she said after a little pause. It sounded as though she had been trying to compose herself. "I have this small apartment in Manhattan because it's convenient to my job. I've been going out to see her most weekends. But I missed these last two weeks, because—"

"Because of being worried about Johnnie?"

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "I'll want to go out there now, of course—but I'd like to see you, too. There are things I ought to tell you now. But I must go out there first."

"I understand," I said. "Maybe later, or in the morning."

"Yes, Dale," she said. "Call me later—even if it's very late indeed. Please—I do want to see you."

I heard myself saying: "I'll ring, Loretta. Tonight." Even on the telephone her voice sent damfool shivers up and down my spine.

There was a tiny click as she put the receiver back on its cradle. I hung up at my end, stood staring down at the dial for a moment. Then I took the receiver up again and dialed the Ruystader home.

"Bogard reporting," I said.

Her mellow voice slid into my ear. Agreeably. But my spine didn't have the shivers now.

"I want to talk to you," I said.

She pitched her velvet tone in a minor key. "Would you like to come on over?"

"I'm hungry," I said. "I'm going right out to Marty Alton's little club in the Village. Can you be there in twenty minutes?"

"Yes," she said.

I waited for her out front. It was ten-thirty and there was no music just then. The boys had probably gone in back to drink their supper. I could glimpse Marty Alton beyond the glass doors giving the customers the high sign and looking as urbane and worldly-wise as only a man with stacks of dough and a cocky disposition can look.

A cab drew up and I saw Mrs. Arline Ruystader was inside, her long thick black hair unmistakably marking her. She swung the door open and slid out, showing two inches more of her nyloned leg than is strictly customary.

She was wearing blonde mink. She managed to look relaxed and mildly predatory at the same time.

Somehow, Marty managed to spot her arrival, and he brushed past me to give Mrs. Ruystader his arm.

"Marty," I said. "I love you like a brother, but Mrs. Ruystader is visiting with me."

He gave his deceptively boyish grin. "You will have the pleasure of Mrs. Ruystader's company for the rest of the evening," he said. "You will not deny me the purely transient pleasure of taking her arm in mine."

HE ESCORTED her into his club in triumph. I followed like the poor relation in the rear. Marty showed us to an alcove table and called a waiter. I ordered what I had been waiting for all evening—steak. Mrs. Ruystader took the same.

"I can always eat a steak, medium rare," she said. "And to the devil with my waistline."

Marty made a Continental gesture. "Your waistline is perfect, my dear Mrs. Ruystader. I have no quarrel of any kind with it."

She gave him one of those long fluttering

glances. Maybe she would start in purring any minute now, I reflected sourly.

Then we were alone with two Martinis.

I said: "I traced the girl I think you mean."

"Yes?" She leaned her beautiful elbows on the table and blew a little cigarette smoke across.

I told her about Johnnie Barkley being strangled with wire, about meeting Loretta Deslay. I told her about Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader wanting to challenge the will, but that was all I told her about the last of the Ruystaders and what had gone on in her whacky house. If Mrs. Ruystader had any emotions she was keeping them under lock and key. She didn't let her half-inch-long eyelashes give as much as a twitch.

When she finally spoke she didn't mention Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader.

She said: "What is your theory about this Deslay girl?"

I told her then about Mrs. Kathryn Barkley. "Way back, your husband was in love with her, and it seems they did a little sleeping together. She had a baby after the Ruystader family got him away from her. A baby girl. He never knew. Does that mean anything?"

"Yes . . ." She said the word in a low voice. "Yes . . . I think it may mean a great deal. But there is more I wish to know."

"Such as?"

The waiter brought the order then and she ate a few moments before answering.

"Such as did this young woman have some intimate association with my husband's death."

"You mean—did she kill him?"

Mrs. Ruystader gave a tiny shrug. "I don't know—Dale. That is the one other thing I want you to find out."

"You want me to stay on the case?"

"Of course, will you do that?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'll stay."

She put down her knife. "That's settled, then. Let's not talk any more business tonight."

I drank beer from a pewter tankard. "What would you like to talk about?" I said.

"You."

"Again, such as?"

"Such as what you do when you're not pushing your nose into other people's sordid affairs? Such as what you do when you feel like a little fun?"

She let her jade green eyes open wide and look directly into mine. Her lower lip jutted.

I said carefully: "Maybe I like taking out beautiful clients and—"

"And what, Dale?"

Her face was not more than two inches away as she said it and the only answer I needed to make didn't have to be put in words, but this was the moment chosen by the waiter to drape himself gracefully against the side of the table and cough. A gentle, discreet cough.

Mrs. Arline Ruystader didn't take her face away. She merely turned it a little—sideways and upward.

"A message for madam," said the waiter deferentially.

It was scribbled on a slip from a tear-off pad. The kind you keep by an office telephone. She looked at it, crumpled it in her hand and rose. A moment before there had been a tiny flush on her face. Now there was none.

"I'm terribly, terribly sorry, Dale. I have to go. It's—rather important."

I stood up, helped her into her blonde mink. I thought I could hear five thousand dollars rustling in the middle distance. She wouldn't let me see her to a cab.

"I'll call you at your apartment—later," she breathed. Then she was moving across the floor.

I waited a while, then wandered into Marty Alton's office out front. Marty was smoking a long black cigar and holding a slim glass in his hand. He looked up inquiringly.

I said evenly: "Like to say what that message was for Mrs. Ruystader?"

There was a hint of trouble in his boyish eyes. "Are you with her—or against her?"

"I'm employed by her—to look after her interests," I said. "That answer your question?"

Marty set his glass down carefully on a small table with a beaten copper top.

"Yeah," he said. "I guess it does. It was

a message for her to see someone at her home in twenty minutes from now. The message said it was important."

"Who sent the message?" I said.

Marty gave a long level look.

"Milt Opal," he said slowly.

Chapter XI

ONE of those light fall drizzles that wet you without your knowing was falling when I moved outside. I turned up the collar of my topcoat, and walked toward the lot where I had left my car. I had my head tucked down and I all but walked into him. He was about a yard ahead, walking in a zig-zag, and mumbling to himself.

But it was his size that I noticed most. Six feet seven would be the size and I would always notice men that size. He was wearing a raincoat and his feet made no sound on their heavy crepe soles. He was Lee Chang and he was far from home and far from being himself.

I forgot about my car and fell in behind him. He acted as if he were drunk. Yet, somehow, I knew he wasn't. He took the Third Avenue El to Forty-second Street, then started zig-zagging again. He never once looked round. All the time he was mumbling to himself. Finally, he took the Lexington Avenue Express and got out at 125th Street.

The rain was hard and cold now and the bottoms of my pants were wet. Lee Chang was moving west, moving slap into the heart of Harlem. Night signs spilled their neon radiance on the wet streets, lighting up faces with flashing white teeth.

He made a few more turns, entered a cross street. Then, suddenly, he wasn't there any more.

I walked on and I saw it—a cellar dive, with four dirty stone steps leading down. I eased the Luger out far enough to flick off the catch and went down after him.

It was a tiny room with a tiny bar at one end and a dozen tiny tables. The joint was crowded and the air was full of slow slurred speech and the reek of alcohol. The giant was leaning against the bar talking earnestly to a very fat colored girl in a white gown.

She saw me before I got close and gave a sharp little clap with her fat beringed hands. A tall Negro moved up to me with a shambling, loose-jointed gait. He wore a threadbare tweed jacket, blue jeans and no shirt. The jacket sleeves were too short and his long bony wrists hung limply out of them.

He said: "Sorry—no white men allowed, suh."

"You'd better bounce the giant then, hadn't you?"

The bouncer gave a long slow grin. "Mr. Chang, he's colored. Anyway, he gone now."

I looked. The fat girl was still at the bar, not taking her eyes off me for a second. I couldn't see the giant anywhere.

"You see, suh?" said the bouncer softly. "This is Negro club. We don't want no trouble. Mr. Chang he gone."

"Yeah," I said, "I can see that. Into a back room, I guess."

THE BOUNCER shrugged again. As he did, he started to bring his big fist up in an all-the-way swing. But I had been watching his eyes. He had the swing about halfway going when he found himself looking down the barrel of the Luger. He stopped the swing dead.

I poked the gun close to his Adam's apple.

"Don't try anything," I called out. "Unless you want this guy dead."

I pressed the Luger forward just a little so that the bouncer kept moving backward until he came against the bar. The fat colored girl didn't make a move.

I said: "I want to speak to Chang. I won't cause your club any bother if I can do that. I'm a police officer." That wasn't true by half, but I got my buzzer out and showed it to her. She didn't look at it closely enough to know the difference.

She spoke in a high voice. "We don' want no trouble. You can see him for a little minute if you don' cause us no trouble."

I nodded. It was taking a chance, but now I had to take it. I had the idea she would keep her word.

She led the way out of the bar, through

a little arched door. There were three steps. Up she went with me following, holding the Luger close to her. There was a small landing at the head of the stairs and another door.

Over her shoulder she said: "Whatever you see now stay under the hat, white boy?"

"Yeah," I told her. "All I want is words with the big yellow man."

She pushed the door open and we moved in. The giant was lying on a dirty low iron bedstead, staring at the ceiling and still mumbling. Alongside a small table near the bed stood a thin colored man. A lamp was burning on the table and there was a tray full of strange-appearing implements. I was conscious of a sweet heavy smell. The thin man was holding a long wire in one hand. There was a balled-up gummy substance on the end of it. I knew what it was. He was using a yen hok.

I felt my mouth twist a little. The giant was taking dope.

The woman stood aside and I stepped up to the bed.

"Lee," I said, "do you know who I am?"

His eyes tried to focus, held me for a second, then wandered off. Suddenly, I knew what was wrong with him. He was half-crazed with terror. That was why he had come here to smoke a pipe. Maybe he had been here times before, drinking and having himself a time. But he wasn't a hophead. Something had happened—and he wanted to lose the memory in oblivion. So he had come back.

I bent down so that my mouth was close up to his ear. "I'm the guy you took to Miss Ruystader's home. Remember?"

He rolled over a little on his side, then rolled back. His thick lips moved tremulously.

"I'm a dick," I grated. "Does that help?"

His hands reached up, spreading outward, trying to push something away. I didn't think it was me.

"I didn't kill them! I didn't kill them!" The words came in a scream.

"Who didn't you kill, Lee?"

"I didn't kill them. I didn't, I tell you. I—"

Suddenly, he slumped back, his enormous arms flung out, his jaw hanging open. I had never seen a giant faint before.

The woman was close to me. "He's out," she muttered. "Sumpn's botherin' that boy. Guess he'll be all right in a little while."

"Yeah," I said slowly. "In a little while."

But I hadn't a little while to wait. Not now. It was too near the end.

IT WAS nearly midnight when I got there. A pale moon slanted its light down and the crazy castle swirled toward me once more out of the mist. I drove into the driveway between the rotted gateposts and alongside the sighing jungle of grass which had once been a lawn.

There was no light anywhere in this mad home of the last of the Ruystaders. At the top of the stone entrance steps I grasped the heavy brass door knob. It turned easily in my hand. When I leaned my shoulder against the door, it swung inward.

I got my Luger out and moved in. I didn't have a flashlight, but it didn't matter. The moon shone palely through the high windows on to the armored horsemen. I walked carefully down the long line.

Then I was in the corridor and standing outside The Room. The door hadn't been completely closed and I knew there was light inside. I could see it dancing, like little lurid tongues.

Suddenly, I kicked the door in. The light came from the shuddering flames of the dying fire.

Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader was no longer in her chair. She wasn't in it because she was lying on the block floor with one cheek pressed against its dark red surface. Where her head rested the color was a little darker. The darker pool spread out from the blood which gushed from the blackened hole almost in the center of her gaunt forehead.

One of her feet almost touched another foot. It belonged to Philip Aramais. He was lying on his back. He was wearing the clothes I had last seen him wearing. That was how I knew who it was. He had been shot through the mouth and most of his face was blown away.

There was nothing I could do except call Homicide. And I couldn't do that yet be-

cause there seemed to be no phone around.

There was something on a mahogany cabinet at the other side of the fireplace that attracted me. I had had my back to it when I was there before.

I stepped over the dead Aramais and took it—a heavy, ornately-framed blow-up of the snapshot I had seen. I wondered why Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader had it.

When I held it a little to the side I could see some writing at the bottom of the picture. The ink had faded to a pale violet color. But I could read what it said.

There were initials: R. I. P. and a date . . . June 2, 1927.

Chapter XII

WHEN I found a drug store that was open I called Police Headquarters. I got O'Cassidy.

"Dale Bogard," I said. "All quiet along the Potomac?"

"It ain't on my beat. What's on your mind?"

I said: "Murder."

I told him about it. I said maybe a double murder out on the rim of Long Island Sound wasn't in the line of his duty but maybe it could be, at that.

"There's something else, too," I went on. "There's a big Chinese lying on a bed in a colored joint called Marga's up in Harlem. When I saw him he passed right out. But first he was raving that he hadn't killed some people. I don't know what people he meant—but I could guess. His name is Lee Chang and he was the third of the Ruystader trio out here. You'd better send some men to pick him up. You'll need his testimony."

Cass said: "Okay—I'll do that. Is this all tied in with the John Jesse Ruystader killing, or are you still playing a lone hand?"

"I'm telling you all I know," I said. "I'd better tell you some more."

"Yeah," he said gently, "I think you should do that, Dale."

So I told him I had seen the veiled woman arriving at Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader's castle. I told him I had seen Mrs. Arline Ruystader hours later and that we had gone to Marty Alton's little club. I told him that she left because she had a message from Milt Opal.

He was silent again. Then: "You know what that adds up to, don't you, Dale?"

"I'm a smart guesser when the sum is easy," I said and hung up.

It was after midnight. The traffic was light. I cut minutes off all existing records for my trip back to Manhattan.

Loretta Deslay let me into her apartment herself. She was wearing a long soft robe of powder blue. She had belted it hurriedly because she was in bed when I knocked at her door and the robe parted enough for me to see just a little that I shouldn't have.

She didn't have any make-up on, but she didn't need any. We moved into her living room. Her back was toward me and I could just catch the sweet fragrance of her lovely red hair, feel the slight warmth of the soft, supple body under its slim covering.

"Would you like something to drink . . . Dale?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'd like some whisky. I need it."

She got out a shot glass and a bottle. I took it neat.

I put the glass down and said: "This evening a big Chinese and a chauffeur got me in a car and took me out to the home of Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader. She is the last of the Ruystader dynasty, a very old woman and not completely there. She wanted me to lay off the case of her nephew's death. When I refused, she was going to have me beaten up, but I managed to get away. As I was leaving the place, a car was just driving in. The woman who was driving it was heavily veiled, but she wore long black hair like Mrs. Arline Ruystader and, from the way she was sitting, she was the right height."

I stopped to give myself another slug of whisky. Loretta's eyes were troubled, but what I was saying apparently still did not make sense to her.

I went on: "Later, I met Mrs. Ruystader and she got a hurry-call from Milt Opal and left me suddenly. That was at Marty Alton's club, where you and I met. When I went out, I saw the big Chinese. I followed him to a joint up in Harlem and he kept

mumbling about people having been killed. So I went back out to the Ruystader castle. I've just come from there. I left Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader and the chauffeur lying dead on the floor. They had both been shot—from fairly close up."

FOR a long minute there was nothing. When she spoke at last her voice was low.

"Oh, Dale! It's all too horrible."

"Yeah," I said, "I know. But it's your turn now. Do you want to talk?"

Her wide mouth was parted and her green eyes flickered momentarily.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes. I know I should have told you before. Somehow, I couldn't."

I went on waiting.

She said: "You know, really, don't you? You guessed when you found my mother dying. John Jesse Ruystader was my father. My mother was the only women he ever loved, but his mad family separated them. He never even knew mother was to bear his child. Mother married finally and had Johnnie. I was always called Loretta Barkley. I was twenty-three years old when I found out—accidentally, the way these things usually are. Finally, mother told me the story."

Still I went on waiting.

"I took my mother's maiden name and determined to make John Jesse Ruystader settle for everything. My mother was widowed and had a little money. I got myself a job in the Ruystader organization. I was there for months before I even had the chance of speaking to—my father. Then, one morning, he asked me my name and when I told him Loretta Deslay I thought he was going to keel over.

"After that he moved me into his own office. He asked about mother, about everything. In the end he arranged to see mother and try to put right the wrong he had done. Or his family had done." She said the last five words with a bitter inflexion.

"And then," she breathed, "then he was murdered. I thought poor Johnnie had done it, or might be accused of it. That's why I was so frightened—I couldn't tell you the truth."

"I understand," I said gently.

A long shudder ran down her then. "What is going to happen now?"

I said grimly: "I think the Homicide squad is on its way to Mrs. Arline Ruystader. I think she will be accused of the murder of Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader. The old woman was going to challenge the will. Arline Ruystader would know about that."

Her hand moved a little, touched my sleeve.

"I'm sorry for her. Now the Ruystader millions won't be any comfort to her, will they?"

"No," I said, "except to hire lawyers."

She said: "We still don't know who killed my father."

"I think it was Milt Opal," I said. "I think Detective-lieutenant O'Cassidy thinks that, too."

Her green eyes widened. She put one hand against her breast.

"You mean it was a plot to kill him so that she and Opal could get the money?"

"It all adds up, Loretta."

"What are you going to do, Dale?"

I stood up, looking down at her.

"Funny thing, Mrs. Ruystader is still my client," I said. "I am going to the Ruystader town house. Maybe she won't need me any more now. But O'Cassidy will want me to do some fast talking."

Suddenly, she was on her feet. Her lovely body was about two inches away. For a second her mouth twisted into a tired little smile, then hardened the way people do it when they are trying to be brave about something when they'd rather cry.

Her arms reached swiftly round my neck, pulled me forward just a little. I wasn't hard to pull just then. Her mouth was warm and soft, but her lips were against mine only for a moment. Then she had slipped away and was standing with another of her wan smiles.

"There's nothing left for me now, Dale. No money, no position. I'm—I'm sort of glad."

I got my hat and coat and walked with her to the door.

We didn't kiss again.

"I'll phone you when it's all over," I said, and I walked out.

Chapter XIII

IF I THOUGHT the Ruystader place would be jammed with Homicide cars, I found out how wrong I was when I parked behind the only car there. It was O'Cassidy's.

The doorman wasn't on duty, but the night janitor was. He let me in.

Mrs. Arline Ruystader wasn't rippling chords at the ivory concert grand. She was leaning her back against it and holding on to the side with one of her hands. She was pale, and her composure had nothing to do with peace of mind. O'Cassidy stood there facing her.

O'Cassidy said, shortly: "I didn't ask you here, Dale. This is police business. I haven't been here two minutes. I went up to see the big Chinese myself."

I stood there, one hand driving into my topcoat pocket, the other swinging my hat.

"He talk?" I asked it though I didn't care about the answer, not now.

"He was full of hop. We put him into a hospital. An officer is sitting by him. We'll find out."

Arline Ruystader stood a little straighter against the grand piano. She tipped her lips with her tongue and swallowed.

"I gather," she said, "that Detective-lieutenant O'Cassidy wishes to arrest me. He is under the fantastic impression that I had something to do with the murder of my late husband's aunt and one of her employees."

O'Cassidy said: "There is *prima facie* evidence." He gave an odd little grin. "Mr. Bogard supplied it."

He didn't look at me while he said it. Arline Ruystader did. Her eyes were asking me questions and I didn't want to answer them.

O'Cassidy shrugged. "Mr. Bogard saw you drive into the Ruystader place out on the Island just before the time the murders were committed. Want to challenge that?"

She swayed against the piano. This time she had to get both hands on its polished top. If she had any words she couldn't get them out.

O'Cassidy picked up again. The toneless, impersonal police voice. "There is sufficient circumstantial evidence right now to warrant an—"

He stopped and made a sudden movement. A gun jumped into his hand. The catch was already off and his long index finger was crooked around the trigger.

"You're not alone, are you?" he asked her in a hard dry voice.

"I—I—" Mrs. Ruystader stumbled on the words, but I saw the direction she was looking. There was a door on the right of the living room.

It had moved fractionally.

O'Cassidy put his foot on a chair, holding the gun hard down on his knee.

"Out!" he said. "If you ain't outa there in ten seconds I'm coming in."

There was a sound and the door opened.

Milt Opal came through it.

He came through insolently, not carrying a gun. His hands were in the pockets of his tuxedo jacket and he had the set of his long down-curving mouth under control. But not the eyes under the puffy lids.

"Okay," he said, "Okay, copper. So I am in a lady's private room. In her bedroom, if it comes to that. Want to make something of it?"

"Maybe."

Opal said, easily: "I am a friend of Mrs. Ruystader's. I didn't want to embarrass her by showing I was here."

O'Cassidy went on holding his big Service gun on his knee and not saying anything. I was still standing with my hat in one hand, but I wasn't swinging it now. I wasn't doing anything except one thing and that was trying not to look at Arline Ruystader.

But I had to do that. What I saw was that now her face had no more color and that her nerves were strung as tight as the wires in her concert grand. I realized Milt Opal knew that, too.

Cass didn't bother looking. He knew it already. He was waiting for the crack up. Any minute now.

For Opal there were no more minutes. He said, in a tight, hard voice: "I'm going out of here."

O'Cassidy didn't speak, didn't move.

Milt Opal gave a little shrug and started walking.

THE BARREL of the huge gun moved then. Fractionally, as though O'Cassidy was sighting along it. Opal quit taking steps.

"You ain't going no place, Opal. Not yet. Maybe in a little while."

Suddenly, the big hood blared at Cass: "I got rights, copper. I got the right protection, too. You're going to know about it. I—"

"Yeah," breathed O'Cassidy, "you got protection, Opal. Maybe you can make a fix. Tomorrow maybe. Or the next day. But not now. I'm holding something which says you can't make it right now."

A little dribble of saliva glistened on Opal's heavy chin and his big hands shook.

"You damned sonofabitch copper, I'm walking straight outa here and you ain't going to—" His voice ascended an octave and climaxed in a little scream. He stood there, rocking on his polished patent-leather shoes.

Then he was calm again. It was the ice-cold calm of hate—and decision. He began to walk fast.

O'Cassidy's big gun boomed just once. Opal spun in an arc, his right hand clutching his left forearm. Then he plunged sideways to the carpet, rolling over, still holding his arm.

He rolled a little more on to his face. O'Cassidy moved swiftly to him, slammed his heavy police shoe on Opal's right hand, pinning it. He bent down and jerked the shiny blue automatic out of Opal's fingers.

"Guess you must be slipping, Milt, trying to get away with that play," he said. "Get up. You ain't hurt much. I only winged you."

Opal swayed to his feet, his injured arm hanging limply at his side. A lot of blood was gushing down his elegant cuff.

Cass said shortly: "Fix it for him, temporary, Dale."

I got water and a bandage roll from the bathroom and went to work on him. I didn't think much of the way I did it, but it would do.

Cass said: "Who killed John Jesse Ruystader, Milt?"

Opal got a long cigarette into his mouth, dragged on it. "Napoleon, I guess."

O'Cassidy turned slowly to Mrs. Ruystader.

"Maybe," he said to her slowly, "maybe you can help now."

She let go of the piano then, moved a little way across the room, walking uncertainly, her lips trying to frame something. Suddenly, she slumped down on the big sofa.

"I—I—don't know." She got the words out in a whisper. "Oh! God, please, I don't know. I don't know, I tell you—"

O'Cassidy moved his long pale lips. I thought he was going to say something, but he was too late.

The voice from the doorway spoke first.

"I'll tell you, copper." It was brittle and a little breathy, like a boy's voice which had suddenly aged twenty years. I had never heard it before, yet I knew it. It hadn't sounded that way a little while back.

He stood there in the doorway, his belted gabardine raincoat swung open, his right hand extended just a little and aiming a .38 Smith and Wesson. The way he was aiming it should be giving Milt Opal a very cold sag in the stomach.

"I'll tell you, copper," he said again. He didn't have a hat, so you could see all of his blond hair. I thought his face didn't look quite so boyish. It had changed with his voice. Maybe he was weak. He had been once. Weak enough to be a fall guy for the kind of hood that Milt Opal was. But now he didn't look weak any more.

Johnnie Barkley had changed.

He moved steadily into the room.

"Want to hear it, copper?" He didn't look at O'Cassidy as he said it. He didn't look anywhere except at Milt Opal.

"Yeah," O'Cassidy breathed the word. "Yeah—I want to hear it, Johnnie."

Johnnie Barkley said: "Opal bumped Ruystader. Mrs. Ruystader was a two-bit showgirl named Arline Manning. Opal got her the introduction to Ruystader when the old man started looking for a wife thirty years too late. It was just a fix. Opal was to get a regular cut for making the fix. . . ."

Opal had his back to the concert grand now. His face had something nameless on it. His mouth worked, but no words came.

Johnnie Barkley looked at him dispassionately.

"Save it, Opal," he said. "You figured I was dead, didn't you? Better make sure the next time." He paused and a twisted smile crossed his mouth. "Only there isn't going to be a next time, is there, Milt?"

He went on: "A regular cut wasn't enough for you, was it, Milt? You got to figuring out other ideas. Chiefly what a good idea it would be if Ruystader died and you could persuade Mrs. Ruystader to make the big payoff. She could be persuaded—if you used the right treatment. That was how you had it figured."

"Go on, Johnnie," Cass said.

JOHNNIE BARKLEY continued: "That was where I came in. I got tangled with the mob. I looked a dead ringer for a sucker. You got Ruystader to my apartment with a phony spiel. You had me out on a heist job so you knew I couldn't alibi myself. You shot Ruystader—planning to let me to take the rap. I knew I had to blow, but fast, and I did—to Kansas City. But you got wise to that, too, and sent that hired killer out to get me."

He gave a sudden queer little laugh. "Too bad you sent Janter. You picked on a guy who didn't even know me. Maybe you figured that was the smart way to play it. Only Janter didn't know I was sharing that room with another light-haired guy. So Janter twists his wire cable round this poor guy's neck and leaves him to die by inches."

Opal made a little sound. He was trying to say something. No one was ever going to know what it was.

I heard what he said, but now nothing he said had any meaning for me. I was looking past the grand piano to the heavy rust-colored drapes across the tall window. They had moved just a little, the way they would if someone had stepped in very quietly from the terrace. I knew someone had done that.

I knew what I had to do. I slid one hand in under my jacket.

"Don't do that, Bogard. There's only one rod talking here and I'm holding it." Johnnie Barkley's once-boyish voice was cold and deadly.

I let the Luger slide back. I was shaking now and it had nothing to do with fear of little Johnnie Barkley.

Then she was through the drapes. She was wearing the jade green whipcord and the white satin shirt with the wide cutaway collar just like she did the first time I saw her. Her hair was very red and very long and curled in at the ends the way I remembered it. The way I would always remember it. I wouldn't want to remember her face. Not *this* face. . . .

Her teeth were shining and there were little flecks of moisture on her lips. But her voice was as calm as the endless night of death.

"You knew I would come, didn't you, Dale?"

"Yeah," I told her. "I knew."

"I didn't fool you with my sweet-baby

talk, did I?"

O'Cassidy made a little movement, but she stopped him. She was holding a .45 Colt with the front sight filed off.

"Drop that rod, copper. You, too, Johnnie."

She put her dainty foot out and kicked the guns so that they slid across the floor, under the piano. She didn't ask for mine.

Calmly, she went on: "You didn't fool me, either, with that talk about Mrs. Ruystader. You knew she hadn't killed anyone. The only thing you weren't certain of was whether it was Johnnie who was bumped. You even knew who the strangler was. You had his little torn bit of suiting. Then you found a whole lot more, Dale. You strung me along and hoped I would follow you here. Well, here I am, Dale."

I didn't say anything. I didn't have anything to tell her. Except maybe one thing. I was never going to tell her that. Not now.

Suddenly, her twisted face jerked sideways to Opal.

"You ended everything for me, Opal. That's what you did, you———" She gave a tiny choke on the sentence.

Then she swung back to me. "Go on, tell them, Dale. You know it all. Tell them, shamus."

I heard a voice only faintly like my own saying: "This is Loretta Deslay. Only it isn't her real name. I don't know her real name."

"It was Janice Engle until she married me," said Johnnie Barkley in an odd little voice. "We couldn't make it work. She ran out on me."

"Yeah," I said, "but not before she found out something your mother had never told you—that your mother had a love affair when she was a young girl with John Ruystader and bore his child, without his ever knowing. A girl with red hair. But she died. I found that out tonight. Loretta took your mother's maiden name of Deslay, told Ruystader she was his daughter.

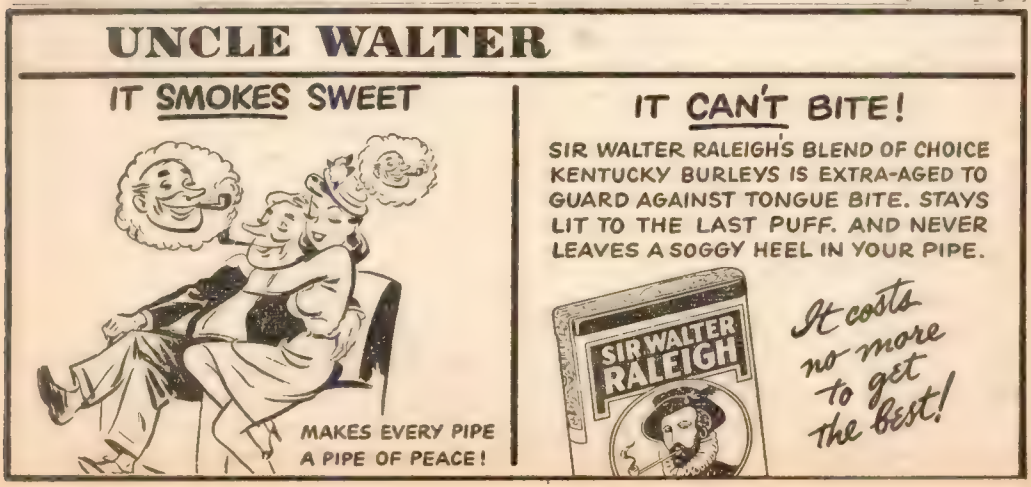
"Ruystader came to believe the story, settled five hundred thousand dollars on her. She would have squeezed a lot more if he hadn't been murdered. She never even told him that Kathryn Deslay was alive. She didn't want competition."

LORETTA DESLAY was watching me, smiling her tiny twisted smile.

"Go on, Dale," she said softly. "Go on—tell them the rest"

I was feeling all loused up inside. I said, wearily: "Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader knew about the little girl—knew she had died. She had a blown-up snapshot picture with the date on it. And initials R.I.P. that might mean 'Rest In Peace.' That was the clincher. That was when I knew for certain, because Loretta had already made the mistake of telling me her age—*and she wasn't born when that picture was taken.* So Marie-Elizabeth Ruystader had to be silenced, because with John Ruystader and Kathryn Deslay dead, Loretta planned to jump the inheritance. She was silenced."

[*Turn page*]


UNCLE WALTER
IT SMOKES SWEET
MAKES EVERY PIPE A PIPE OF PEACE!
IT CAN'T BITE!
SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF. AND NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE.
SIR WALTER RALEIGH
It costs no more to get the best!

I stopped then because Loretta Deslay was laughing. A laugh I never want to hear again.

"I shot her and that flunky of hers," she said. "It was easy. I went out dressed to look like Mrs. Arline Ruystader. I even had a black wig." She gave me another look. "Only you saw me, Dale. And you weren't fooled. You're so clever."

"Not so clever. I was fooled for a little time," I said. "You sat on a cushion to look tall."

No one spoke now. Cass still had his foot on the chair the way he had the last quarter-hour. He stood there like a man carved out of stone. Mrs. Ruystader still sat on the sofa, her eyes wide: but she wasn't cracking now. Johnnie Barkley swayed very gently, his lower lip trembling. Opal was still supporting himself against the piano, beyond speech.

Loretta Deslay turned just a little.

"You dirty cheapskate hood." She said it scarcely above a whisper. "You ended it all for me. You shouldn't have done that."

As she said the words she lowered the massive Colt and fired so that the big shell took him just below the pelvis. Opal bent almost double in a reflex, then straightened, bent again and plunged headlong to the floor, writhing. Then he stopped. Blood was still seeping from his mouth, but he was dead.

O'Cassidy jumped across to her, but he never made it. There was a sharp little crack from the doorway and her huge Colt spun from her. It circled upward, then fell heavily on the tuned wires of the grand.

There was a quivering dissonance.

Loretta Deslay had a queer tortured look on her face. But only for a moment. Then for another moment, all the liveliness came back. She stood perfectly still, both hands on her breasts, staring at us. Her green eyes were lovely and unseeing. Then, slowly, her knees crumpled and she sank soundlessly to the floor. But she had already died.

No one spoke. The silence of the big room was like something you could feel.

"That levels everything," said Dolores Vasquez at last. She walked quite calmly into the room, a little .25 handbag automatic hanging at her side.

She stood looking down at Milt Opal. "I loved him," she said simply.

Johnnie Barkley was crying. Very quietly. He said, as though he was speaking to himself: "That was what was wrong. Janice never loved. So she never lived. A lot of people have died because of her. Maybe they all had something of life. She never really knew anything of living. She's the last to go —but she was really the first. I guess the loveless always die first. . . ."

* * *

Cass had long gone. Dolores Vasquez went with him. I didn't have any score to settle with her now. Johnnie had gone. This time to find a new life. For him it was the beginning.

For me there was still this big lush room. It was near to dawn and the room was hot, but I was cold and tired and I no longer felt anything.

I was standing by the tall window and I knew that Arline Ruystader had suddenly moved close to me. For her there was no ache now.

"You . . . loved her . . . a little, didn't you?" she said.

I shrugged. "I don't know. There was a moment. Perhaps not anything more than that. I can't explain it—"

She moved again so that I could feel the shape of her against my side. She was warm and soft and there was a little perfume from her hair. I held her briefly and very lightly.

We walked back across the room. The door was open.

She said: "I have an account to meet, haven't I?"

I gave her a long steady look. "I told you that you'd fixed it so that I could never charge you a cent," I said.

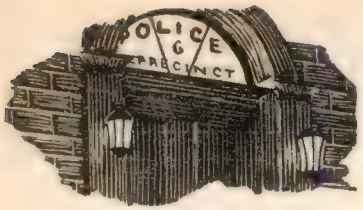
She let her lip purse outward a little. The way I had seen her do it once before. *Her* eyes were steady, too.

"I didn't mean *that*," she said.

She stood back from me then. Her lips were parted and I could hear her breathing.

I reached out a hand and pushed the door slowly to.

It made only a tiny sound. . . . ● ● ●



BUREAU OF MISSING PERSONS

Are there any friends or relatives with whom you have lost contact through the years and whose whereabouts you'd like to determine? Perhaps there's some old war buddy or former schoolmate or sweetheart you'd like to locate. Let's have the facts and we'll publish them. Tell us the name of the person you are seeking, the last known address, and any other facts that will help in making contact. There is no charge of any kind for this service, but please let us know of your success.

I AM WRITING THIS in the hope that you or some reader may find the whereabouts of my wife, **IRIS (ALLEN) BACON,** who left Kissimmee, Florida, in March, 1951. Last heard of at Lyons, Georgia, working as a waitress at "Starling Drive In." Left there with no trace. In case she may see this: The children need you so. All is clear. All is forgiven. Please communicate. Any information concerning her will be highly appreciated.—**Roy E. Bacon, General Delivery, Kissimmee, Florida.**

I WOULD LIKE to hear from anyone who knows the whereabouts of any of my father's relations. He died a few years back and the only thing I can find out is that he used to live in Charles Mix and Avon County, South Dakota. His name was **FRED W. HEBNER.** —**Wm. F. Hebner, 1031 N. 48th St., Phoenix, Ariz.**

I AM ANXIOUS to locate my ex-husband, **MÉDARD MESSIER.** Last known of him was about twenty-five years ago when he was a waiter at the McAlpin Hotel in New York City.—**Mrs. Gabriel Bertrand, Ste Adèle-en-Bas, c/o Terrebonne, Quebec, Canada.**

I HAVE BEEN READING of your service to others in helping them locate missing loved ones. I am asking your service in locating my son, **JOHN JELLEY, JR.,** who has been missing for over two years, last seen by his wife and five small children at their address in Zeigler, Illinois, 403 Oak Street. Since that time the only way we know he may still be alive is by his tax returns from different parts of the United States.

He is a well built person, 5 ft. 10½ in. tall. When last seen his hair was dark brown. Has blue-gray eyes, was 38 years old last Oct. 2. He has a small dark scar on forehead at center hair line, also a tattoo on left arm with initials J.F.J. on it. His left hand is crippled, little finger drawn up and stiff.

Under what circumstances or for what reason he left I do not know. To me and his family he has disappeared. We have worried, hoped, and prayed, until it seems he may be beyond locating. His small children are being neglected beyond reason.

In 1949 he worked for: Union Pacific Railroad Co., 1416 Dodge Street, Omaha 2, Nebr. Also: The Chicago, Burlington and Quincy R. R. Co., Chicago 6, Ill. In 1950: Espy Ice Company, 2101 31st Street, Denver 5, Colo.—**John R. Jelley, Sr., Box 293, Kincaid, Ill.**

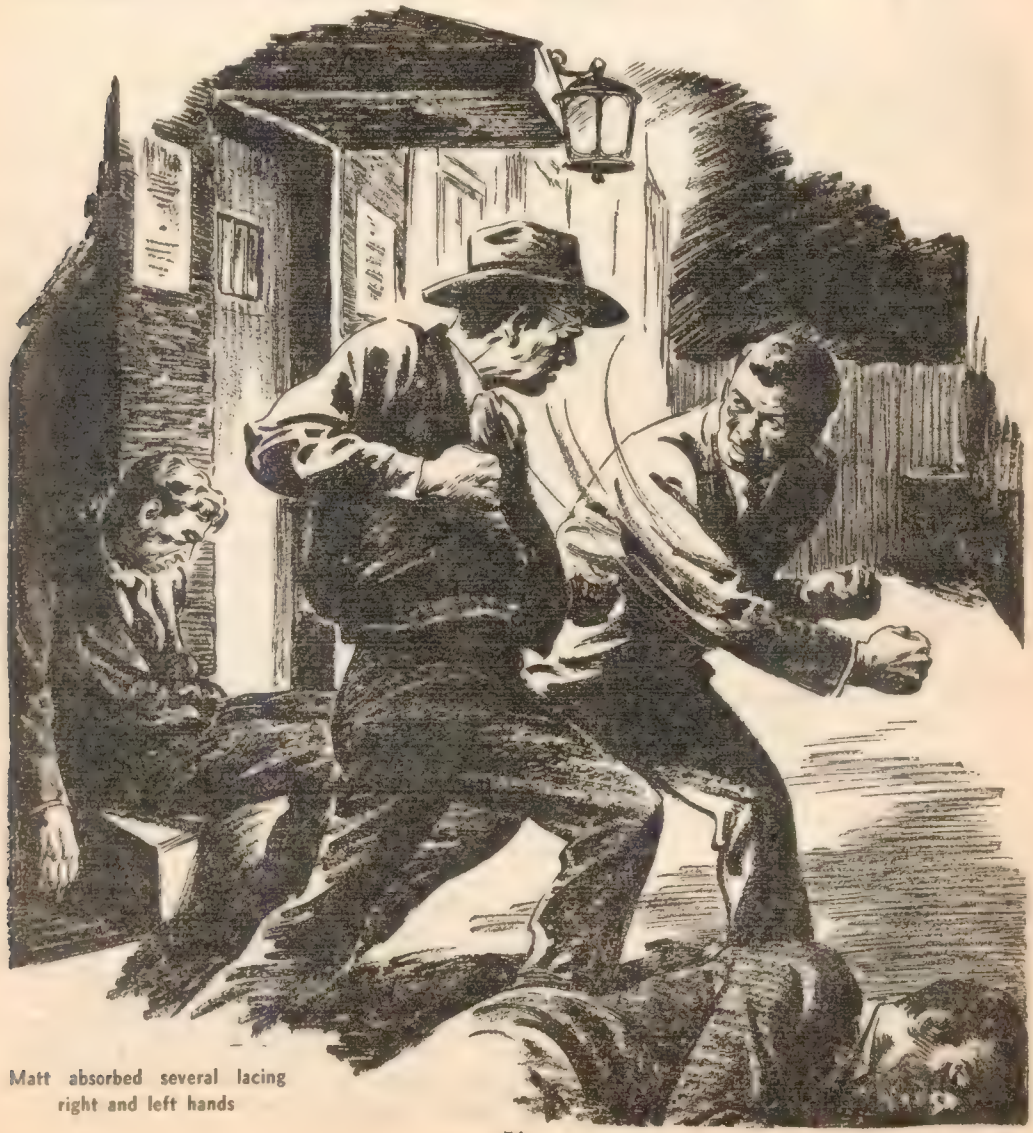
I WOULD LIKE TO CONTACT or hear from anyone who has known or knows the whereabouts of **VERNON K. SOUTH,** age 47, brown hair possibly turning gray, blue eyes, height about 6 feet. Last known address: Oak Ridge, Tenn. He is an old buddy of mine.—**M. V. Allen, 184 Front Street, Draper, N. C.**

CRY MURDER!

Chapter I

"ARE YOU driving to San Francisco?"

Matt West shifted around and glanced at the young guy who'd squirmed onto the counter stool beside him. Kind of a beat-out kid, twenty-five or six, with dark hair worn heavy at the sides. His eyes made him look hungry.



Matt absorbed several lacing right and left hands

A Novelet

by DONN MULLALLY

Matt said, "Yeah. Soon as I finish my coffee."

"Can you give me a lift?"

The kid dressed well enough—not like a highway tramp or a tough punk—although his blue suit bagged a little at the knees and his collar wasn't too clean.

"You been on the road long?" Matt asked.

"All day, coming from Los Angeles. I was hung up north of Bakersfield for three hours." The kid tugged at his wrinkled collar. "I half cooked before I got another ride."

"You don't know anybody here?" Matt nodded at the truck drivers along the counter or torturing the pinball machines in the corner. Nell, the waitress, was giving the fry cook a bad time at the other end of the diner. It had been a hot day for Nellie, too. Her blue uniform was wet across the back and looked as if it had shrunk tight over her thick hips.

"No," the kid answered. "No, I don't."

"I'd be taking a chance, then, wouldn't I?" Matt said. "You might pull a gun on me after we were under way."

The kid grinned. "You can search me if you want."

Matt finished his mug of coffee. He had noticed the kid when he first entered the diner. He was the only guy there not in dungarees or khaki, and it made him look out of place, lost.

Matt asked, "What's your name?"

"Duncan Kemper."

"Can you prove it?"

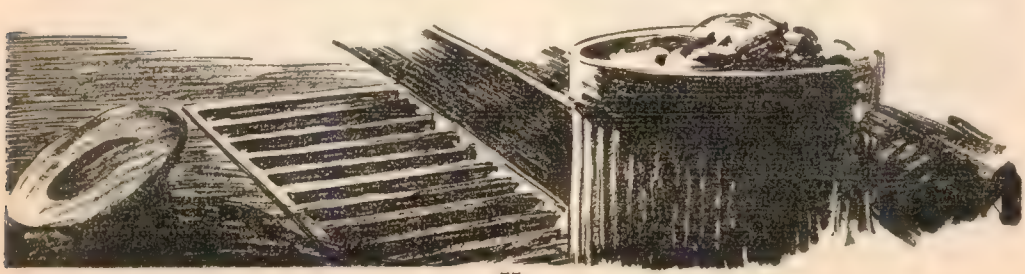
The kid took a thin yellow wallet out of his hip pocket and showed Matt a social security card, a musicians' union card with his picture on it.

Matt swung off the stool, towered over the kid. "Okay, Kemper," he said. "Let's go."

Outside, the air was turning cold, dry cold. The sun had been down long enough for its sweaty grip on the valley to have been slightly dissipated. They could see the lights of Fresno a few miles back, throbbing like a neon boil. Matt pulled on a leather jacket before he climbed into the cab of his big gray transport.

The semitrailer dwarfed even Matt West. Sometimes it frightened him, when he'd get worn down, as he was now, from too many hours without sleep, too many cigarettes. His stomach was shot to hell with nerves, so all he could keep on it was coffee. The coffee helped, but its effect would wear off in half an hour and he'd be bucketing along the highway on the business end of a battering

Matt was innocently ogling the half-naked girl along with the rest of the morons—but a killer was watching her too!



ram, fighting sleep, the temptation to close his eyes just a minute, a second.

Matt told Kemper to get in the cab, crawled under the wheel and started the big diesel engine. He switched on the Christmas tree and the headlights. When they were rolling, he settled back, lit a cigarette without taking his eyes off the road.

"Look, Kemper," he said. "You want to get to San Francisco, don't you?"

Matt saw Kemper's reflection in the windshield nod. "Ye-es." He sounded suspicious of Matt's question.

Matt smiled to reassure him. "Okay. Here's what you do. Start talking. Tell me your life story. Tell me about your girl or your wife, your mother, your best friend, the last movie you saw. But keep talking. If I start to act bored, sleepy, don't be afraid to yell at me. Can you do that?"

KEMPER gave him a half smile, said, "Sure. Where do you want me to start?

"I don't care," Matt said with a shrug. "Any place. You're a musician. What do you play?"

"Piano."

"You any good?"

"I get by."

"What do you mean, get by?"

"It's a living—when I work."

"What kind of music do you play?"

"Chicago-style bop, mostly."

"Why're you going to Frisco?" Matt wanted to know. "Looking for work?"

"No—for a wife," answered Kemper.

"A dame who'll marry you?"

"A dame I already married. My wife."

"What's she doing up here, visiting with her folks?" From the corner of his eye, Matt watched Kemper tear a cigarette in half, put one end of it in his mouth, light it.

"No, working," Kemper said.

"What's she do?"

"An entertainer."

"You mean a dancer or singer?"

Kemper didn't answer right away. Finally he said, "Have you ever been in the Gold Bar in San Francisco?"

"No. Is that where your old lady works?"

In the darkened windshield Matt saw Kemper's image nod. "Yeah. They've got a gimmick for baiting tourists at the Gold Bar, called The Girl in the Gilded Cage. It's done with mirrors. The cage is about three feet high. When you look at it, you'd swear you were seeing a girl about a foot long, swinging on a trapeze—stuff like that."

"What's she wear?" Matt asked, interested.

"Mostly a yellow wig. But she also has on a leotard."

"A what?"

"Tights," Kemper explained.

"And that's your old lady?" Matt had guessed right, and Kemper nodded. They rode for a while to nothing but the roar of the big diesel in front of them.

"So what's this trip for?" Matt asked. "You going up for a visit?"

"I want her to come back home," stated Kemper.

"You mean she left you? You're separated?"

Kemper flipped his cigarette butt into the slipstream of wind brushing past the cab. It made a tortured, hot arc and disappeared.

"She left me six months ago," Kemper said. "Just walked out one day on me and our kid. No word from her. I wouldn't know where she was, except the Gold Bar was written up in a picture magazine. I saw Jean's picture."

"You've got a kid. A boy?"

Kemper said, "A girl. Four years old."

"Why'd your wife pull out?"

"I don't know. I was working at the time, steady. We had a little house in Hollywood, nothing sensational, but I thought it was a pretty happy arrangement, till I came home one night from the club where I was working and there was no Jean."

"I'll bet it's been tough trying to hold down a job and look after the kid too, huh?" Matt said.

"No picnic."

"Where'd you leave the kid?"

"Friends of mine are looking after her."

"Think you can talk your old lady into coming back?" Matt asked.

"I'm going to try," said Kemper. "Frankly, I haven't been worth a damn since she's been gone. Our youngster asking for her all the time—it's a lousy situation."

"What if she won't have anything to do with you?" Matt sneaked a fast, sidelong look at his passenger.

"I don't know." Kemper sighed. "I suppose the youngster and I will make out. But at least I'll know what happened—why she left us."

"You figure that'll make you feel better?"

"Maybe I'll feel worse," answered the piano player.

They left it there for a few miles, the diesel chewing up highway, growling over it.

"Well, fellow," Matt remarked at last, "I hope you get what you want, whatever that is. I know it's a rough pitch to make a gal come back, once she's left. Maybe your kid will push it over for you."

"Thanks," Kemper said. "Now what'll we talk about?"

"Why don't you tell me what gives with this bop music?" Matt suggested. "I've got two tin ears, so it ought to take you the rest of the way to San Francisco to get it across to me."

It did. Matt let Kemper out just after they crossed the Bay Bridge.

Chapter II

IT WAS JUST short of eleven when Matt West pulled into the Terminal Market. The streets were wet with fog rolling in from the bay, the air cold. He closed a quick deal with one of his regular buyers for the spuds he'd brought up from the valley. As soon as the truck was unloaded and he had his check, Matt drove to a lot where he usually left his rig when he stayed over in San Francisco.

Matt was pooped, but he knew he wasn't going to a hotel. Not right away. There was something he was curious about—that girl in the gilded cage. Maybe she was wearing tights, like Kemper had said, but if you couldn't tell she had them on, what the hell? It ought to be worth the price of a couple beers.

He might even see Kemper again and find out if he'd done himself any good.

Matt took a taxi to the club, which was on Columbus Avenue, almost out to Fishermen's Wharf. He had a rhubarb before he got past the front door—over a necktie, the one he wasn't wearing.

"Hey," a man in a dinner jacket said, clawing at Matt's arm. "You've gotta have a necktie to come in here."

"I got a necktie," Matt laughed, brushing past the man. "At home."

The Gold Bar set up as a fine, plush-lined cockpit. It was a sunken oval, with a bar all the way around the wall on the level of the entrance, making a sort of mezzanine. A fancy gold railing kept drunks from falling over onto the big spenders at the tables on the floor below. The ceiling was covered with mirrors—murder on a guy with a bald spot.

Of course, the attraction was the girl in the cage, which stood on a pedestal draped in some kind of bluish gray material with gold leaf designs embossed on it. The cage was about the right size for a large South American parrot. It seemed to be made out of gold, and there was a gold swing suspended from the top of the cage. A blond doll, with hair streaming down her naked back, was having a hell of a big time on this swing. She looked maybe a foot tall.

In the billing, her name was Jean Starr.

Matt elbowed to the bar, ordered a beer. He glanced around the room. Some of the boys were really punishing their eyes. But Duncan Kemper wasn't one of them.

Matt wondered if there was any truth in the line Kemper had given him about being married to this girl. It was a good story, but Kemper could have made it up, with no more to go on than the picture magazine he'd mentioned. If that was it, Kemper wouldn't be the first hitchhiker Matt had picked up who had handed him a ripe hunk of fiction. He wouldn't be the last, either, Matt snorted to himself as he dipped a thick upper lip into the creamy head on his glass of beer.

Matt looked at the girl in the cage. He couldn't hate Kemper for touting him onto as good a deal as this. Even if she was reduced to gremlin size by those mirrors, she was still a one-thousand-per-cent improvement over the calendar art and stuffed mooseheads which decorated most of the gin mills on Matt's list. He was ogling Miss Starr with

the rest of the morons when she stopped swinging, leaped off her perch. Her mouth was open as though she were screaming.

SUDDENLY a man, a foot-high guy, appeared in the scope of the mirrors, struggled with her. He was trying to choke off her screams—or just choke her. There was a buzz of excitement around the bar.

Matt recognized that baggy blue suit, the way the guy carried himself. Duncan Kemper! So Kemper hadn't been kidding about this doll being his woman! He certainly didn't seem to be having much luck convincing her that she was. She broke free of Kemper, ran out of range of the mirrors.

A small hassel had broken out on the floor of the club, too, at one of the tables. A well-tailored character was battling with an old girl in a nickel-plated wheel chair. She had her talons set on his arm and was screeching, "Gordon, you're staying here with me!"

What with one thing and another, the Gold Bar was jumping. It took Matt a while to realize that someone was thumping him on his thick, leather-jacketed shoulder. He turned.

The man from the door, who wanted Matt to wear a necktie, had brought up reinforcements. To Matt, he looked like a hood and he was scowling. He spoke like a fighter, very soft, tough.

"Okay, Joe," he said. "We don't want your business. Get out."

Matt said, "What about my beer? I paid for it."

The hood grinned narrowly. "How do you want it—in your hair?—the hard way? I said beat it." He twitched his head at the door.

Matt saw customers on both sides of him taking this all in. He leered. "If you didn't have so much high-class trade, Shorty, I'd let you try that. Besides, I think your floor show is lousy."

The old girl had got her young gentleman to sit down at their table again. Matt deliberately finished the beer in his glass, then stalked out of the club with the bouncer panting on his neck. They parted at the sidewalk.

Matt stood in front of the Gold Bar a few minutes, trying to decide what he should do. What about Kemper? Was it any of his—Matt's—business what happened to this bop piano player? Matt knew the answer. It wasn't.

A voice behind him said, "I beg your pardon—"

It was the old lady in the wheel chair and her friend. They wanted past. Matt stepped aside, watched the young guy gently load her into a chauffeur-driven limousine that had pulled to the curb. A ramp unfolded down to the sidewalk, and he wheeled her in, all the time taking a chewing.

Matt heard her say, "I've never been so embarrassed in my entire life, Gordon."

Gordon mumbled something about being sorry. She was still chipping when he closed the car door and went back to the club. He looked slightly beat.

Matt started to walk toward the cab stand at the corner, passed a little alley which led to the stage door of the Gold Bar. He saw he had Kemper trouble again.

There wasn't a lot of light in the alley, only a feeble globe over the steel door at the end of it, but enough to silhouette three men who were very busy with each other. Too busy to notice Matt. He came up behind them, grabbed one of the two who were working on Duncan Kemper.

Matt spun the man around, drove a fist in the general direction of his face. He felt the skin on his knuckles break on the man's teeth. Matt let go, pumped a couple more fast rights to the man's face, crossed his left hard to the back of the man's head.

Scratch one contestant.

The other guy had more fight in him, more science. In the dim light, Matt saw he was the bouncer from the Gold Bar. He dropped Kemper, limp, in a corner of the alley and closed with Matt.

He was hard to hit and had a good punch. Matt absorbed several lacing left and right hands. He began to feel his last twenty-four hours on the road. His legs got heavy, wooden, and he had trouble keeping his arms up. Floundering into a clinch, he spun his man into the wall. He was lucky. The man hit his head hard against the bricks and sagged in Matt's arms. Matt finished it.

He stepped over the bouncer's stiff, extended legs, took hold of Kemper by the back of his coat, and dragged him out of the alley. It wouldn't do to be there when the bouncer came to. Matt knew he couldn't be lucky all night.

HE DRAPED one of Kemper's arms around his neck, walked him until the rubber left the kid's knees. When Kemper could track straight again, Matt took him into a little bar and bought him a drink. He needed it.

Kemper's face was badly chopped up. Matt glanced at his own reflection in the bar mirror. He didn't look exactly like the Queen of the May, either.

He nudged Kemper, grinning crookedly through a pair of swollen lips. "Your friends are rough," he said.

Kemper nodded, downed his whiskey and made a face.

"I suppose this is a foolish question," Matt said, "but how'd you do with your old lady?"

Kemper gazed dully at the empty glass on the bar in front of him. "Not good," he muttered. "She screamed she didn't want to see me any more, said we were through. She wouldn't listen to me."

"Your kid?" Matt asked him. "Didn't she want to see her, either?"

"No," replied Kemper.

"She say why she left you?"

Kemper nodded. "She told me she hated me, the kid, our house, and our life. She was making her own living, the kind of life she wanted."

Matt rubbed his hand over the red bristles on his jaw. "How'd you mix with those two guys in the alley—she sick them on you?"

"No. They jumped me after I left her dressing room."

"So what do you do now?" Matt wanted to know. "Go back to L.A. and try to forget her?"

Kemper shook his head. "I can't. I can't go back to Los Angeles with only a couple of minutes' brush-off to show for my trip. I'm probably crazy but I want to have a real talk with Jean. I want to show her pictures of our youngster, give it a real try Then, if she turns me down, that's how it has to be."

Matt flopped a big arm across Kemper's pinched shoulders. "This is your party, kid, and you can pay me off any time you want to. But if a strong back figures in your plans anywhere—"

"Thanks, Matt," said Kemper. "If I had a plan, I'd figure you into it some place. I appreciate what you've done already. But I—"

"Maybe you'll stand still for one of my dim-witted suggestions," Matt said, smiling. "Look. Your wife doesn't live at that club. It closes in about an hour. She'll be going home. Why don't we follow her, and you pin her down for this heart-to-heart talk while I stand outside and make sure nobody breaks in on you?"

"I can't ask you to do that, Matt," answered Kemper simply.

Matt shoved away from the bar. "Who's asking anybody?"

Chapter III

THEY TOOK a cab to an all-night U-Drive garage, rented a car. Matt had said, "I don't expect your wife walks home from the club." Then they parked across the street from the Gold Bar, waited for Jean to finish her stint in the gilded cage.

When she did show, there were two guys with her. One of them was the joker who'd gone that fast round with the wheel-chair lady—Gordon. The other had a strip of adhesive plaster over his right eyebrow. Matt recognized him—the first guy he'd dusted off when he went to Kemper's rescue in the alley.

Kemper said, "That's Al Blake, Jean's boss. He owns the Gold Bar."

They watched the three people get into a large, foreign-made convertible. Gordon was driving. Matt had no trouble keeping the big heap in sight in the late traffic as they drove across town to the Fillmore district, the San Francisco Harlem. They stopped outside a small, basement jive joint.

Matt parked, said, "Look, we'll take no chances with any of those people slipping out a back way. I'll go in."

This bop place was small, smoky and smelled of bodies. Tables were stacked together, with customers rubbing thighs like a bunch of crickets. On the tiny bandstand, four very gone colored gentlemen were making a loud noise.

Matt sucked in his stomach, squeezed into a tiny hole at the bar. Across the packed room he spotted Jean and her two escorts. He had trouble getting anybody to take his dollar and serve him a bourbon-and-7-up highball. A cup of coffee would have been better, but he knew this wasn't the place.

He turned, balancing his drink, watched the mob. That Jean was a real cat, when she wasn't being the girl in the gilded cage. Her eyes were glazed, far away, as if she were riding marijuana. She might be, at that, Matt realized.

There had to be some reason for her walking out on a perfectly decent little guy like Kemper, her home, and baby. Dope was as good an answer as any—or as bad.

He began to watch her more carefully, saw the way she played with her cigarette, made love to it.

Al Blake and the other guy were sitting on either side of her, talking past her over the wild music. They didn't exist for Jean.

The band made with a small closing fanfare and left the stand. A lanky saddle-brown piano player took over, started riffing off a few arpeggios.

Matt saw Jean get up from her table, work her way to the back of the joint, toward a door marked *Ladies*. There was a flurry of activity at the table. The two men scraped to their feet, and Al Blake caught himself a large fist on the bridge of his nose. All that kept him up was the people crowded tight around him. A dame in the room screamed, and Matt saw waiters closing in on the two gladiators.

There was nothing for them to do. Blake picked his way through the mob, holding a handkerchief to his nose. He walked by Matt without recognizing him. No doubt his eyesight had been affected.

A COUPLE OF seconds later, Jean Starr came out of the ladies' room walking on the pink fringes of Cloud Nine. Matt could have been wrong, but he was betting she was gowed to the eyes. The winner of the one-punch slugfest met her halfway. He had her mink coat across his arm and guided her, pouting, out of the joint.

Matt gave them a minute's start, then trailed them to the street. He didn't see anything of Al Blake, but Jean and her man were getting into the foreign-made job that had brought them.

Across the street Matt heard Kemper grind the starter on their rented junk. He trotted over and slid in beside Kemper as Jean and her friend roared away from the curb.

Kemper made a fast U turn, fell in behind them, but about half a block back. He said, "What went on in there, Matt? I saw Blake come out alone and grab a taxi."

Matt chuckled, keeping his eyes on the car ahead. "The guy with your wife now and Blake squared off. Blake's going to have a sore nose tomorrow to go with the mouse I gave him and the loose teeth."

"Where was Jean when they were fighting?" Kemper asked.

"In the little girls' room," Matt replied.

Kemper said, "Good."

Matt wondered. He thought of the smoky way she'd been walking when she left the joint, the out-of-this-world glaze in her eyes as she floated past him. Matt almost asked Kemper if he'd ever known his wife to be on the stuff, then decided against it. The guy had plenty to worry him as it was.

The car ahead took them over Nob Hill, turned off before they got to Chinatown, cruised down some dark streets. Finally it glided to a stop in front of a small apartment house, a three-storied building, modern, white and blocky in the light from the corner street lamp.

Matt said, "This is your chance, Kemper. Cut 'em off."

Kemper nodded, cramped the wheel, parked diagonally in front of the foreign-made convertible.

Matt hit the pavement, running. He swung on the handle of the door on the right side, the driver's side of the convertible, got the door open.

"What's going on?" Gordon flared.

"It's not a stick-up," Matt told him, "so relax. Keep your hands on the wheel and your foot off the starter."

He could see Jean Starr slumped in the seat. Then Kemper opened the door on her side of the car. She looked at him, bleated, "Good grief! Not you again!"

"Jean, I have to talk to you," Kemper said, his voice pleading. "Just ten minutes, that's all, ten minutes."

"Jean," her friend said, "who are these men? Do you know them?"

Her head moved lazily as she studied Matt in the shadow of the car. She said, "I don't know him. But this one—" she pointed to Kemper— "is my loving husband, a lousy piano player."

The man under the wheel said, "Oh." He acted embarrassed, uncertain what his next

move should be. At last he decided and thrust his hand at Kemper across Jean.

"Glad to know you, Mr. Starr," he said. "I'm Gordon Towne."

"His name isn't Starr," Jean giggled. "It's Kemper—Duncan Kemper. You never heard of him. Nobody ever heard of him."

Matt glanced over the canvas top of the car at Kemper's bowed head. He felt sorry for the guy. Frankly, he looked for Kemper to slug her and call it a night. That's how Matt would have handled her if she'd been his. Kemper was tugging at his wife, pleading with her.

Towne tried to break into the act. "Kemper, I don't think she—"

Matt tapped him on the shoulder. "Look —you keep out of it."

JEAN LET GO with a few choice remarks about her husband's ancestry, then pushed him aside and slid out of the car. She seemed a little unsteady at first, but managed to walk stiff-legged toward the lighted entrance of the apartment house.

Kemper looked across the top of the car at Matt. "What do I do now?" He sounded confused.

Jerking his head in the direction of the building, Matt said, "You'd better get off the dime, if you have any points you want to make with her." He watched Kemper run after his wife, get to the door while she was still fumbling with the key. The two of them disappeared inside.

Towne said, "Mind if I stretch my legs?"

Matt grinned at him. "Help yourself."

They stood in the darkened street with nothing to say. Matt was thinking what a lucky guy Towne was to see his girl-friend in action, find out what a sweet character she really was. Personally, he would've run like hell.

Towne said, "Have a cigarette?" and extended a pack.

Matt took one, was lighting it on Towne's gold torch when they heard shots. Three, raggedly placed, with a woman's scream sandwiched somewhere in the middle. It seemed to come from the building Kemper and his wife had entered.

Matt said, "Let's go!"

He ran to the entrance. The door was locked. Matt kicked a glass panel out, reached in and opened the door. He and Towne ran to the stairs, bounded up them three at a time.

On the second floor, they found what they were looking for. A gun, and two bodies.

Kemper was in the hall, not more than three strides from the stairway. His wife sprawled in front of a door that had a key in its lock. Her pocketbook had spilled when she fell. The air in the hall was charged with the sting of burnt powder.

Chapter IV

FOR all Matt could tell, it might be a total job. Neither Kemper nor Jean was moving; and from the blood he could see on both of them, he didn't think they

were going to move any more.

Down the corridor, some doors opened and a few scared people thrust their heads out but jerked them back when they saw the bodies.

"He shot her!" Towne gasped, backpedaling. "He brought her up here and shot her!"

Matt caught him trying to sneak down the stairs, clamped a hand on his shoulder and dragged him back.

"You're not going anywhere," he told Towne. "Not until the cops are through."

"But—but—" Towne jabbered. "I—I didn't have anything to do with it. I was downstairs with—with you."

"I know," Matt agreed. "Maybe we can make that a two-way alibi—if we need it."

He pulled Towne across to Jean's door, stepped around her body, turned the key in the lock and swung the door open. He flipped on the light in the flat, pushed Towne ahead of him toward a telephone he saw on a coffee table in front of a davenport.

Matt dialed Operator, asked her to connect him with the police, then reported what they had in the hall.

After he hung up, he looked at Towne who was slouched on the arm of a big chair, eyes dull. His skin looked gray, as if he were sick.

Matt said, "The cop'll be here in a few minutes. In the meantime, we might as well see if there's anything we can do for those kids."

Towne rose listlessly, muttered, "Yes. Yes, of course."

Matt gave him a small shove in the direction of the door. "Get on with it, Florence Nightingale," he said.

The first thing the inspector in charge of the police detail asked Matt was, "Have you touched anything?"

Right then, Matt was kneeling where he'd been for the last ten minutes—beside Duncan Kemper, pinching the large artery in the lad's neck. The inspector's question seemed pretty dumb to him.

He growled up at the chunky cop who dressed like a stockbroker. "Yeah. What was I supposed to do—let this man bleed to death?"

Inspector Hay's red face flamed. "Okay," he snapped. "I'll see you get a First Aid merit badge. I meant, did you touch the gun or this girl's body?"

"The gun, no," Matt declared. "The body, only enough to be sure she was dead."

"That's what I wanted to know," Hay commented. "Now, where was this man in relation to where the gun is laying?"

Matt looked from Hay to Gordon Towne's gray, tense face, his bloodless lips. Matt had a hard time saying it; hated himself, the truth.

"Kemper was lying on the gun," he admitted. "Face down, here in the hall. The gun under him."

Ambulance attendants came up the steps with a folding stretcher and relieved Matt. Matt got to his feet, flexing his hand to start the circulation. The muscles of his legs were cramped from kneeling beside Kemper.

INSPECTOR HAY turned to Gordon Towne, asked, "What do you know about this?"

Towne said, "Very little, really." He told how he had driven Jean home, how Matt and Kemper had cut them off at the curb in front of her apartment. "Jean introduced Kemper as her husband," Towne went on. "They seemed to be having some kind of a disagreement. Kemper was pleading with her to come back to him."

Hay nodded. "They were separated? Kemper wasn't living with his wife?"

"To the best of my knowledge, no," Towne said. "Jean had been here alone ever since she arrived in San Francisco."

"They'd lived together in Los Angeles," put in Matt. "They had a kid. A little girl."

"This was the first time you ever saw Kemper?" the inspector asked Towne.

"I believe I saw him earlier—but rather indirectly. I was at the Gold Bar, where Jean worked. She was the girl in the cage. Somehow, Kemper broke into the room in the basement of the club, where Jean performed—"

"All he wanted was to talk to her," Matt said, scowling. "He wanted her to go back to Los Angeles with him, look after their

home and little girl."

"How do you know so much?" Hay asked. "Where do you figure in this?"

Matt West looked around the crowded hall, at the cops busy with their cameras and other gadgets, at the tenants who had lined up, goggle-eyed.

"I bought in very cheap, Inspector," he said. "I was hauling a load of spuds in from the valley, ran into the kid hitchhiking and gave him a lift. He told me about his wife leaving him with their kid, working at this night club."

"Did he ask you for help?" the inspector wanted to know.

"No," Matt answered. "That was strictly my own idea. What he told me about his wife's job at the Gold Bar made me curious. I went down, after I got rid of my spuds, to have a look. I was there when Kemper broke up her act. When I was leaving the club, I saw a couple of guys working Kemper over in an alley. I thought the odds were a little uneven, so I gave the kid a hand. After that, I sort of tagged along to see how he'd make out."

"Did Kemper voice any threats—what he'd do to his wife if she didn't come back?" Hay asked.

"No. All I remember him saying was that if she didn't, he'd have to return to L.A. and make the best of it, but at least, he would've made an effort to patch up his marriage."

"Did you know he was carrying a gun?"

"I'm pretty sure he wasn't," Matt replied, wrinkling his forehead. "When I picked him up, I asked him how I knew he wouldn't pull a gun on me. He offered to let me search him. If he'd been armed, he wouldn't have offered."

"He had plenty of time to get a gun after you left him here in town, before you saw him again."

Matt nodded solemnly. "I suppose he did, but he wasn't talking like a man who was out to kill anybody."

"Where did this rod you say he was lying on come from? He hatch it?"

Kemper had been given emergency treatment, was lifted onto the stretcher and carried downstairs while they were talking. He hadn't recovered consciousness. There was no question of his defending himself anyway. The bullet had passed diagonally through his lower jaw and come out through the opposite cheek.

Jean's body was covered with a blanket and taken away, after the police photographers and technicians finished with it. The other tenants still stood around like cattle in a slaughterhouse, confused and frightened.

Gordon Towne touched Hay's sleeve. He said, "If you don't have any further questions, Inspector, I'd—I'd like to leave."

Hay waved him off. "Okay. If there's anything further, I'll contact you."

"How about me, Inspector?" Matt asked. "Can I go to the hospital with Kemper?"

Hay had already taken what information he wanted from Matt's driver's license. "Yeah," he said. "I'll probably see you there."

MATT WEST was pacing the corridor of the Harbor Emergency Hospital, outside Kemper's room, about an hour later when Inspector Hay came in. The doctors had just finished with Kemper in the operating room. Matt had seen him rolled by with his lower jaw puffed by the wire that held it together, a big surgical dressing under his right eye where the bullet had come out.

"How's your friend?" Hay asked, his round face grave.

"All right, I guess." Matt shrugged heavily. "But the doc's got him so hopped up, I doubt if you'll be able to ask him any questions for a long time."

Hay smiled thinly. "We're loaded with time, West. Kemper's the one who's short in that department."

"You can't sell me on the idea he shot his wife," Matt declared. "Maybe a jury will feel the same way."

Inspector Hay shook his head. "You've known this man not more than ten hours, West. Aren't you forming some fast conclusions?"

Matt took a package of cigarettes out of his leather jacket, lit one under a *No Smoking* sign on the corridor wall.

"Some guys, you don't have to know for

a lifetime, Inspector."

Hay snorted. "How do you get around facts—shut your eyes?"

"What facts?" growled Matt defensively. "So the dame was shot. Somebody else could have been waiting—shot her and Kemper."

"Yeah." The cop nodded. "I thought of that. I had a paraffin test made on Kemper's hands before he was cleaned up for the operating room. It showed burnt powder. His fingerprints were smeared on the gun. He was lying on it. Kemper had been fighting with his wife. She'd been giving him a lot of static. Maybe he went a little nuts, West. But he shot her."

Matt saw a nurse whispering toward them in her white, starched uniform. She had a starchy frown for his cigarette. He dropped it on the floor, ground it out.

"Okay, Inspector," he said. "Just don't try my boy already. A lot of things can happen."

Matt left Hay grinning smugly in the corridor. He felt for the guy in that wire-screened jail ward. Kemper probably didn't even know what had happened to him, yet. Didn't know Jean was dead, that his little girl was short one mother.

Maybe Jean was a louse at the motherhood racket, but she was the only real mom the little girl would ever know.

Somehow, Matt couldn't believe Kemper would get so far off base he'd forget that point. He wouldn't shoot the dame, not with her daughter asking for her, no matter what Jean did or was.

Chapter V

GORDON TOWNE lived in a gray stone mansion on Pacific Heights, overlooking the bay. It smelled of important money, was as cheery as a mausoleum and as homey as the First National Bank. There were lights on in the first floor, and Towne's convertible was parked at the front curb when Matt West pulled up in his rented coupe.

Towne himself met Matt at the front door, said, "Come in, West. You telephoned just in time. I was getting ready for bed.

Matt felt like a midget under the tremendous marble dome of the entrance hall. All it needed was some tellers' cages and a bank dick for local color.

He trailed Towne through a large double door which opened onto a study. This room was real cozy—only half as big as the garage where Matt kept his semitrailer. The walls were lined with leather-bound books; there was a fireplace, complete with log fire; heavy leather furniture; a French period desk in one corner of the room.

As they came in, an old girl before the fire spun her nickel-plated wheel chair around so she could see them. She looked like Towne made up as an old lady—the same heavy bone structure under taut skin, the same bloodless mouth. Matt hadn't paid much attention to these details when he'd seen her earlier at the Gold Bar.

Towne said, "Mr. West, this is my aunt, Amelia Towne. Mr. West is the gentleman I told you about, Aunt Amelia, the one who was with me when Jean was shot."

Amelia's eyes darted from Matt to her nephew. "I'm sure I could have placed Mr. West unassisted," she said acidly.

"I hope I'm not keeping you up, Miss Towne," Matt remarked. He found a place to sit on the davenport across from her. "There's really nothing—"

"Don't worry about Amelia, Mr. West," interrupted Gordon Towne. "I don't know when she sleeps. She's always awake, no matter what time I get in."

"People sleep too much," snapped Aunt Amelia. "They waste half their lives being unconscious."

Matt thought about his last thirty hours, the two or three quick naps he'd been able to steal while his transport was being loaded or unloaded. He said, "Yeah, I know what you mean."

Gordon Towne was standing in front of the fireplace. He said, "Well, Mr. West, what was it you had on your mind?"

Matt started to light a cigarette. Amelia Towne sniffed. "If you don't mind, Mr. West," she said, "I'd prefer you didn't smoke."

Matt said, "Sorry," put up his cigarettes. That left him at a loss for something to do

with his big hands. "If you don't like tobacco smoke, Miss Towne, you ought to stay out of places like the Gold Bar," he said quietly.

AMELIA stiffened, but Gordon said, "Tonight was a rare occasion, Mr. West," he said. "My aunt had heard so much about Jean and what she did—I thought, if she could see for herself, it wouldn't seem so shocking."

"I don't know where you get your sense of values, Gordon," said his aunt. "It was certainly a most vulgar display."

"That was some show you and Gordon put on, too," observed Matt.

Again Towne carried the ball. "I lost my head," he confessed. "When that man broke in on Jean, I—I wanted to protect her. I didn't know he was her husband. I thought some crank—" Embarrassed, he cleared his throat. "But I'm sure you didn't come here to discuss my café manners, Mr. West."

"No." Matt wagged his head. "I want you to know I think you're a lucky joker."

"I don't believe I understand."

"If you had to pick between being where you are right now, and where Kemper is—in the prison ward of Harbor Emergency Hospital—you'd take your spot, wouldn't you?" Matt asked, grinning slyly.

"Of course, but—"

"Okay. So, in my book, you're lucky," Matt said. "I'm giving odds that the bullet Kemper stopped was meant for you."

"But he shot himself. How—"

"Did he?" asked Matt.

"Why, I thought it was fairly obvious."

"Look," Matt said, "I'm a truck driver. I got hair on the back of my hands and boils on the seat of my— Beg your pardon, Miss Towne. Anyway, I'm a truck driver and I don't fancy myself a detective, any part of a detective. But that doesn't mean there's an iron curtain between me and a small amount of sense.

"I don't believe Kemper came to San Francisco to kill his wife. I don't think he did it. He just had the lousy luck to be standing there when the boom fell—where you figured to stand, Mr. Towne."

"I?"

"Yeah. You'd brought Jean home, hadn't you? You would've taken her up to her apartment. Isn't that the gentlemanly thing to do?"

"I suppose it is," Towne admitted.

"Okay. When Kemper followed his wife into the apartment building, he was doing what you were expected to do. If someone was waiting in the corridor to bump off Jean—and frame you for it—they might've shot Kemper before they realized their mistake. Then they had to go through with it.

"They turned the gun on Jean, then fired the gun once more from Kemper's hand so it would give a positive paraffin test and the gun case would carry his smeared fingerprints."

Towne frowned, uncertain. "But who?" he asked. "Who'd have any reason to kill Jean?"

"I don't know," Matt declared. "But I'm positive Kemper didn't. He had every reason in the world to want her alive."

"She wasn't going back to him," Towne objected. "You heard what she said, what she called him."

MATT nodded. "They were fighting words," he acknowledged. "However, as long as this little girl of theirs is in the picture, I don't believe words would've made Kemper kill Jean.

"But Al Blake, her boss—" Matt went on. "I saw you slug him in a jive joint down on Fillmore. What was that for?"

Aunt Amelia sat up straight, her nose aquiver. "You didn't!" she snapped.

Towne flushed, fumbled with his hands. "I'm afraid Al made a remark I didn't like," he confessed.

"What did he say?" Matt asked.

"Yes, Gordon," Amelia said frigidly. "What could such a person possibly say—"

Towne shrugged. "Something about Jean."

"What?" barked Amelia.

Towne was studying his hands, doubled into a single tight fist in front of him. "Al said Jean was using dope. He said reefers weren't enough for her any more, that she had to go to the ladies' room for a main-line jolt."

"What are you talking about?" Amelia asked. "I don't understand these terms—reefer—main-line jolt!"

Matt chuckled. "A reefer, Miss Amelia, is a marijuana cigarette. A main-line jolt is a shot of cocaine pumped into a main artery with a hypo. If Al knew what he was saying, Jean must have been a pro."

"He didn't!" declared Towne. "If Jean had ever used marijuana, it was Al's doing. That's what made it such a foul thing for him to say."

"On the level," Matt said, "what was it with you and Jean? I mean, were you serious—thinking of marriage?"

Towne drew himself up stiffly. "I don't believe that's any of your affair, Mr. West."

"No—" Matt raised his thick shoulders indifferently—"it's not. It's strictly your affair, Towne, and in more ways than one. If Jean was the only party the killer was after, you're all right. But if he was gunning for you, too, he can always try again—unless we pin Jean's murder on him first."

"But Al wouldn't—"

Matt said, rising, "Then you don't have a thing to worry about, Towne."

He nodded to Amelia Towne and walked silently out of the room.

Chapter VI

AL BLAKE'S Gold Bar didn't open until eleven o'clock in the morning. Matt was there, passed with the first wave of lushes through the swinging door. The early-morning crowd wasn't so formal as the evening swells. Nobody challenged his tieless state.

He found a stool at the bar where he was almost hidden by the other customers and a couple of fluted pillars supporting four naked gold cherubs.

He had a few hours' wait before he got action. Al Blake came in, went up some stairs at the back. Ten minutes later, Gordon Towne showed. He didn't cast around for any friends as he padded through the club and up the steps Al had used. He didn't see Matt.

From where he was sitting, Matt could make out the cuffs of Towne's well-tailored trousers at the head of the steps. Next, he heard two shots in rapid succession, saw Towne's feet do a crazy jig at the top of the stairs. A third shot followed, and Towne's body was launched into space.

Towne pinwheeled down the stairs, ending in a flat, quiet bag of clothes on the dining-room floor.

Matt ran to Towne's body just as Al Blake appeared in the hall at the head of the stairs, looked down at the scene below him. A blue steel automatic dribbled over the edge of two or three steps, stopped. Matt hadn't seen Al drop it.

Yelling at Al, "Stay away from that gun!" Matt turned and bolted from the club. The lushes at the bar hadn't budged off their stools. Maybe they thought the whole show was on television and would be released at a more convenient time.

Matt headed for the little alleyway that led back to the Gold Bar's stage door. He made the turn in a dead heat with someone coming the other way, scrambled the person back into the alley. They went down together in a tangle of arms and legs. Matt kept it that way—tangled—until he had her arms pinned to her side, lifted her to her feet. "We're a long way from our wheel chair, aren't we, Auntie?" he smirked.

She lunged, tried to bite him, and her teeth clicked together just short of Matt's ear.

He said, "You pull that again, Auntie, and I'll ram those dentures down your throat!"

A big cop lumbered into the alley, saw Matt holding Amelia Towne, noticed her torn clothes. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

Matt told him. . . .

DUNCAN KEMPER looked better than he had any right to look. Maybe it was the change of scenery—getting out of the wire cage he'd been in when they had him in the prison ward. His face was still swollen, his lower jaw blue with beard. The wire holding it together kept him from getting too gay. But he'd do, Matt thought.

Inspector Hay, who had come with Matt, was perched on the end of Kemper's bed,

his flushed round face one large Irish smile. He said, "I don't know how you thank a guy for your life, Kemper, but, as long as you have time on your hands, you might work on it."

Matt said, "Nuts, Inspector! He doesn't owe me anything. But you do."

Hay looked at him, snorted. "Me?"

"Yeah," Matt nodded. "What's it worth to catch a killer? It ought to be worth something."

Hay sobered. "All right. I'll buy you a drink."

"Suppose we make a deal," Matt said. "You tell me what you coaxed out of Amelia, and we'll call it square."

Hay hugged his fat knee. "Okay, Matthew," he said, grinning, "you're in. I think the docs will say Amelia is a little off her trolley—quite a little. It's been going on for about twenty-five, thirty years, building up to this. She had some screwy ideas about Gordon's father. She didn't approve of his wife.

"Shortly after he married, she threw herself a fit and has been in a wheel chair ever since. Probably, in the beginning—according to our official alienist—she really was paralyzed. A psychological business. She outgrew that over the years but still clung to her wheel chair. It made her seem like a martyr.

"When her brother died, Amelia took over. She raised so much hell with Gordon's mother, the poor gal just quietly folded and died. This we learned from their doctor.

"So there was Amelia in control of the situation from her nickel-plated wheel chair. Everything was jolly until Gordon started to shave, run after girls. Naturally, she didn't approve. None of them was good enough to be a Towne, particularly the showgirl types Gordon seemed to prefer.

"According to Amelia, Gordon was no special good. He was wasting the fortune her brother had left him, the fortune her brother had worked fourteen hours a day—Amelia says—to accumulate. When she couldn't stand it any longer, she decided Gordon had to go.

"She'd known for a long time she could walk but figured the fiction of her paralysis would keep her above suspicion. I guess that's about it, except, Matt, I think you were a bright boy to flush the old girl out of her snake pit."

Matt West shook his head, looked at Kemper and the inspector. "It was nothing, believe me," he growled. "All the time, my money was on Al Blake as the killer. But when I saw Al at the head of the stairs, I knew I was all wet. Nobody could be dumb enough to shoot a man when he knew he wouldn't stand a prayer of fixing an alibi. There had to be somebody else hiding in that hall, waiting for Gordon, somebody who knew he'd be there. I took a chance on catching up with them when they crashed out the back way." He grinned at Kemper. "You can't help being lucky, can you, kid?"

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By MORRIS COOPER

THE NAKED TRUTH

LATER, when the police came, no one could remember who had suggested starting a crap game. But the idea met with a gay and immediate response. The swimmers trouped away from the arclit pool, laughing and yelling as they went around the far side of the big house.

They went into the rumpus room, which was a part of the small building holding the outdoor dressing-rooms and separate from the main house. There were ten people in the group, five men and five women, and they pattered across the hardwood floor of the rumpus room in bare feet and dripping swim suits.

A couple of minutes later they were on their knees, forming a semicircle against one of the pine-paneled walls, absorbed in the fascination of clicking dice.

While dice clicked, and everyone was absorbed in the crap game, Ed strangled the lady—and he was sure no one could ever know!

Outside, the pool lay alone and deserted, shimmering in the glare of artificial light, a bright oasis against the dark night. A soft, dreamy waltz floated gently through the cool air.

One of the men kept watching a wall clock, and when the hands pointed to five minutes of eight he moved cautiously from the half-circle. None of the intent dice players paid any attention as he backed away slowly and slipped from the room.

Edward Nuylan paused when he reached the side entrance of the big house and took a deep breath. The first part of his plan had come off without a hitch. He knew how gambling fascinated the nine people he had left on their knees. It would take a deafening roll of thunder to tear their attention from the galloping cubes.

He stared at the open lighted window that was directly over the near end of the swimming pool. And for no reason at all he recalled the time when he was a kid and on a dare had jumped from that same window into the pool.

Even though he couldn't see into the room, Edward Nuylan could picture the two women in it. Nurse Holmes would be feeding the old lady her late supper. And in a few minutes the nurse would leave and return at eight-thirty to tuck old Sarah Dodson into bed. Which gave him almost half an hour. But if his luck held out, Sarah Dodson would be dead and he would be back with the dice players in ten minutes.

He listened to the soft waltz and hoped the old lady wouldn't decide to turn off the music and arclights because the pool was deserted.

EDWARD NUYLAN'S bare feet made no sound as he went through the side entrance and up the flight of carpeted stairs. He had no fear of running into anyone—this was their evening out for all the servants. Nurse Holmes of course would be around as well as the gatekeeper. On the first floor landing he halted an instant, listening, then crossed the hallway to an unoccupied room. He left the door slightly ajar and waited.

The rim of the moon edged clear of a cloud bank, bathing for a moment Edward Nuylan's shadowy figure in the glow of its tarnished-silver reflection. Then new clouds scurried over in reinforcement and flooded the room with darkness.

Nuylan's plan was quite simple. A towel twisted around Sarah Dodson's neck and the financial troubles he was in would be over. Of course there would be police and questions and suspicions. But in the end no one would be able to prove anything.

It should be an hour at least before anyone got around to sending for the police. Nurse Agnes Holmes would find the old lady dead and call the doctor. He would come and putter around a bit in his dawdling fashion and finally decide it was a case for the authorities.

Edward Nuylan had enough experience as an attorney to know there was no chance of the strangling being passed over as accidental death. But he had no qualms or fears. Time would be on his side and he was the only one of the group of ten who wasn't a relative of Sarah Dodson. In a way, they stood to gain more from his act of murder than he did.

A door opened and closed and he peered through the thin crack. He watched Nurse Holmes, a covered tray in her hands, walk slowly and stolidly down the long hallway. Her white, low-heeled shoes rapped a heavy, measured cadence against the hardwood floor. At the end of the long hallway she turned left, leaving behind the echoes of her slapping footsteps.

When the last echo faded away, Edward Nuylan waited for the space of forty pounding heartbeats—that was time enough for the nurse to descend the single flight of stairs leading to the rear service kitchen. Then he slipped into the hallway, bare feet pattering as they strode swiftly toward the room the nurse had come from. Tightly clenched fists pressed against the knob, turning it steadily, making certain no finger prints were left.

He edged into the bedroom, using an elbow to shut the door. Sarah Dodson was sitting in a wheelchair near the open window. She glanced up at the sharp click of the closing door and smiled a welcome. Her tired eyes did

not see a killer—only someone she knew, clothed in nothing save a pair of swim trunks.

"You shouldn't go about like that," she said gently. "You're likely to catch a cold."

A floor lamp between the hospital bed and a night-table filled the bedroom with soft light. Evidently the nurse had switched off the ceiling bulbs before leaving. The folded towel on the night-table saved him the trouble of getting one from the bathroom.

He came to her side and stood there silently. Through the open window he could see the long swimming pool, one end directly below him. The water looked like black ebony in the brilliant glare of arclights and the strains of a new dreamy waltz were drifting softly through the night air. He could see no sign of life outside. There was no danger from the gatekeeper. This side of the house was hidden from the long winding driveway.

He noticed the scarf lying across the back of the wheelchair and decided to use it instead of the towel. Sarah Dodson smiled when he twisted the scarf around her neck and said protestingly, "Please don't bother, Edward. I'm warm enough."

When he kept on twisting her eyes looked into his and this time they saw the killer instead of a friend. Her eyes widened, and settled into a steady gaze, not of fear but of pity. And then that was gone, too, leaving only the cloudy gray film of death.

THE killer let the scarf fall to the carpet. An ear pressed against the old lady's bosom, a hand felt at her wrist for a trace of pulse, and he straightened, satisfied. The old lady was dead.

Edward Nuylan walked to the door, fists clenched to turn the knob again. And froze! The clack of stolid feet drifted down the hallway—the nurse was turning into the corridor, returning to the old lady's room.

He turned and sped back across the bedroom and suddenly he felt himself slipping. Edward Nuylan teetered madly, arms flaying wildly—for a horrible instant his heart choked in terror at the thought that he was going to fall, be trapped with the woman he had murdered. Then he caught his balance. Startled eyes looked down and saw the thin, slimy pool on the carpet that had almost spelled his doom.

Probably some food the old lady had spilled. The nurse was coming to clean it—that would explain her quick return. Ordinarily it should have been at least half an hour before she came back to tuck her patient into bed. The unexpected return of the nurse was a stroke of bad luck. It was also a possibility Edward Nuylan had foreseen and planned for. The pitch blackness of the night was in his favor.

He picked the towel from the night-table, at the same second turning out the lamp and leaving the room in darkness save for the glow that came through the window from the arclights. He heard the nurse pause outside the bedroom door.

With a towel-covered hand Edward Nuylan reached to one side of the window, pressed a switch, and the arclights illuminating the swimming pool blinked out. Then the toweled-hand moved to a knob, twisted, and the strains of the dreamy waltz blared into a deafening roar.

He lifted a bare foot to the window sill, pushed against the frame. Then he was hurtling through the inky blackness to the wet safety of the pool twenty feet below.

Black water closed over his head, sucking him under, but he fought off panic and swam to the edge of the pool. He waited, knowing the deafening din of music would bring the dice players from the rumpus room. The darkness would shield him as he slipped into their midst and no one could ever say Edward Nuylan had been missing from the group for an instant.

Nurse Agnes Holmes heard the sudden crashing blare of music as she set a mop and a half-filled bucket of water on the floor. She opened the bedroom door and in the light that streamed from the hallway she saw a towel flutter to the carpet beneath the window.

Her patient was sitting quietly in the wheelchair—too quietly, the nurse thought, as she hurried over. Compe-

tent hands felt for signs of a pulse, failed to find any. She went into the bathroom, came back with a hypodermic, plunged the sharp needle into a stringy vein.

Then she called the doctor, speaking quickly and crisply above the blaring music. Nurse Holmes cradled the phone, her eyes still on the old lady. She noticed the thin lips turning blue, the red welt on the wrinkled throat, the scarf that lay in a careless huddle on the carpeted floor.

The nurse heard the tramp of feet in the hallway and she walked to the door, twisted the key and locked it. She pressed the wall switch, bringing bright light back into the bedroom. Fists pounded at the closed door, demanding admittance. Impatient voices shouted queries, but the nurse paid no attention.

She lifted the phone again, hesitated briefly as the dial tone buzzed. Then she made up her mind and a steady finger spun the dial once.

The blaring din of music filled the bedroom with a crescendo of sound and she had to press the receiver against her ear tightly. When she heard the voice of the operator, Nurse Holmes spoke loudly and clearly:

"Please get me the police. I want to report a murder."

SERGEANT GRAYSON, attached to the State Police, brought the captain up to date. "The nurse was coming back to clean up some food Mrs. Dodson spilled. Otherwise the killer wouldn't have been so pressed for time."

Captain Leed sat in a leather-backed chair in the library. Through a pair of french windows he could see the group of people, still clad in swim suits, gathered in a huddle at the near end of the pool. The arclights had been turned on again and the music shut off.

"How did that music happen to get so loud suddenly?" the captain asked.

"Well," answered Grayson, "the old woman was sick for years and couldn't get around." He looked about the library, at the stacked shelves, the air of accustomed richness. "Plenty of money, but I guess she would have traded it all for a new pair of legs.

"Anyway, she liked having people around. It amused her. That's why the swimming pool is so close to the house. One end of it is right under the window of her bedroom. And she had a couple of controls installed in the bedroom, so she could turn the arclights off or on. Same for the music in case she wanted to make it louder or softer."

Captain Leed tapped his chin reflectively. "Those the only controls for the lights and the music?"

"Uh-uh. There's one in the kitchen and another at the far end of the pool."

"Which means there were three places the lights could have been switched off and the music turned up."

"Right. But from what Agnes Holmes says, it was probably done in the bedroom so the killer could escape."

"I wonder what made her so certain Mrs. Dodson was murdered."

"Well, she's a registered nurse and knew her patient had been all right just a few minutes before. She didn't like the look of those blue lips because the old woman's heart wasn't too bad considering her age. And then there was that towel floating in air—she told me she didn't believe in ghosts."

"No chance an outsider did the job?"

"Don't think so, Captain. The walls around the grounds are pretty high and the gatekeeper didn't let anyone in except that bunch out there. Besides, it isn't likely a stranger would know about those controls."

"Could be. There's also the possibility the nurse did it herself and then hollered police to throw us off the track."

FIXEDLY, Sergeant Grayson stared through the french windows. "But I don't think so," he said. "No motive."

"Mrs. Dodson had a lot of money."

"Sure. And the nurse is down for a sizable bequest. But she didn't know anything about it."

"No?"

"One of that bunch," the sergeant gestured toward the swimming pool, "is Edward Nuylan, her attorney. He brought me up to date about the will."

"What about the rest?"

"Well, three of them are the old woman's nephews and they've got their wives with them. The extra woman is a niece, and the other couple are cousins."

"Nine, huh?"

"Ten, if you count Nuylan. From what I hear, his father used to be Mrs. Dodson's lawyer and young Nuylan spent lots of time here as a kid."

The captain yawned. "How're the boys coming along upstairs?"

"Ought to be finished pretty soon."

"That bunch out by the pool, any of 'em need money?"

Grayson laughed. "Don't we all? I mentioned that little fact when I was asking questions and none of 'em tried to get cagey. Each one admitted being able to stand a chunk of ready cash."

"They all mentioned in the will?"

"Every one. Mrs. Dodson wasn't stingy either. None of those birds will have to work any more."

"What about Nuylan?"

"Short, too. Looks like he's got an eye for fast women and slow horses."

"I mean, was he mentioned in the will?"

"No. But he's got a motive just the same. He's sole executor, and on an estate this size that'll mean a plenty juicy fee."

The sergeant turned as a door opened and a trooper came into the library. Grayson asked, "Finished up there, Mike?"

"Just about. Whoever killed the old woman was plenty careful about not leaving any tracks."

"Doc Lewis say it was murder?"

"No doubt about it. His guess is that she was strangled with the scarf."

"A man?"

Mike shrugged his shoulders. "Doc says not necessarily. The old woman wasn't very strong."

Captain Leed put in, "Jumping from a window doesn't seem like a practical way of leaving a room—even for a murderer."

"Don't guess the killer figured on leaving that way," said Grayson. "But when he heard the nurse coming back, it was the only way out."

"Didn't that sad-looking lot out there notice anyone missing?"

"Naw. They admit they were in the middle of a hot crap game."

Captain Leed sighed. "I guess we're in for a long night."

Mike coughed. "Maybe not, Captain. One of the boys found something real interesting."

YOUNG EDWARD NUYLAN was the fifth to come into the library. The curtains were drawn, and the four who had preceded him were in another room, guarded by a couple of troopers.

"Just a few more questions, Mr. Nuylan," Grayson said.

"Glad to help anyway I can in this dreadful affair," the lawyer's voice was sober. He was about thirty-five, dark pouches shading blue eyes, and the swimming trunks revealed a body soft with dissipation. "But couldn't I get dressed? I'm not too comfortable."

"Won't take more than a few minutes. We'd like to have your prints first."

The attorney smiled. "Why not?" He held out his hands.

"Uh-uh." Sergeant Grayson pointed to his bare feet. "Them."

"My feet! That's preposterous!"

"I don't think so. Whoever murdered Mrs. Dodson stepped in some spilled food and left a nice set of toeprints on the window sill when he jumped into the pool."

"I won't stand for any such nonsense!" Nuylan said huffily. "Who ever heard of toeprints?"

"I'm surprised at you. Hospitals take them every day to keep newborn babies from getting mixed up. A toeprint is just as distinctive as a fingerprint."

Sergeant Grayson was grim. "I guess that's something you overlooked when you killed the old lady. You were plenty careful not to leave any fingerprints."

Nuylan sputtered weakly, his face pale. "You're leaving yourself open for trouble, making statements like that."

The sergeant gestured toward a trooper. "Take his toeprints, Kelly. And I'm betting a week's pay they'll match. None of the others raised any fuss when I asked for a set."

Nuylan covered his face but the sergeant's voice kept grinding into his ears. "There was plenty of butter in the gruel Mrs. Dodson spilled and your toes picked up a nice oily film. You left your signature on the window sill when you jumped into the pool. And that signature is going to get you an early morning date with the hangman."

KISS the DEAD GIRL

His embrace was fatal!

I NEVER KNEW Tildsley's wife. She's not important in this story, except that if she hadn't divorced Tildsley, he wouldn't have thrown a party and there wouldn't have been a murder.

That afternoon Alfred Tildsley barged into the district attorney's office. He was a top-notch criminal lawyer who was poison to us in the courtroom, but outside it he and Orville Kent, my chief, were the best of friends.

"That's like dancing at a funeral," the chief said when Tildsley invited him to help celebrate the divorce.

Tildsley smiled. He was a slim, neat man who was brilliant at charming jurors, especially if they were women.

"Why not bury a dead love when it's

He put his head in his hands as I followed her out of the apartment

by
BRUNO FISCHER

dead, and with wine and laughter?" he said. "That's better than keeping the festering corpse of love in your home, in your bed, while—"

"Meaning me," the chief cut in quietly. His rather heavy face showed only a little anger. "Meaning me and Crystal. But you're wrong. You listen to gossip."

There was an uneasy silence. I was standing at the chief's private filing cabinet, looking up records on a current hit-run case, and I wished I were anywhere else at the moment.

I knew Crystal Kent well—a stately full-bodied woman who could make any man's blood race and who knew it and enjoyed it. Maybe, if she hadn't been the chief's wife, I would have let myself fall in love with her. There were other men who did not have that restraint, but how far she responded I had no way of knowing. I envied the chief in his having her for a wife and at the same time, I felt sorry for him.

Tildsley broke the silence with his charming laugh. "Well, are you coming to my party?"

"I am not," the chief said. "I'm not a ghoul."

Tildsley turned to me. "If I can't get the D.A. himself, how about his assistant? Coming, Hank?"

I like parties, and Tildsley had a reputation for giving good ones. I said sure.

I needn't have been flattered. It developed that Tildsley was broadcasting invitations. When I stepped into the outer office a few minutes later, he was inviting Tom Pendleton, our ace investigator, and Miss Bennett, one of our stenographers.

Later that afternoon I asked Miss Bennett if she'd like me to pick her up on the way there. It was sheer impulse. In a year and a half she had been hardly more than a fixture behind a typewriter or bowed over a shorthand book. She was quiet and shy and inconspicuous. I wasn't even sure of her first name—Hannah or Hilda or something.

While I dictated a brief to her my head was full of Crystal Kent because of what Tildsley had said, and I felt very lonely. My eyes lighted on Miss Bennett's trim leg swinging as she made pothooks in the book. I heard myself asking her to come to the party with me.

Her blue eyes flashed angrily. "Why—because I'm going anyway and don't live far out of the way?"

Those were the reasons, of course, and there was no use trying to hide them. "Why should you object to my offering you a lift?"

"That's it, a lift." Her bitterness shocked me. "You're trying to be kind. Well, I don't need your kindness."

I thought I understood. She wasn't a bad looking girl but probably was too shy for dates, and she was taking the resentment of her loneliness out on me. That made both of us lonely.

"Look," I said placatingly, "I really want your company. I'm sorry if I offended you."

Suddenly she smiled, wanly and rather sadly. "I'm the one who should apologize. I'd love to go with you."

That's a woman for you.

"Swell," I said. "I'll be at your place at nine."

WHEN I called for Miss Bennett that evening, she wore a clinging green dress and had done things to her face and hair. For the first time I noticed that she was neatly and tightly put together. Sweet was the word for her. Sweet, but not exciting like Crystal Kent.

It turned out that Tildsley had invited half the town. The party spilled all over his big house, but most of it was concentrated about the liquor table in the living-room. I shouldered my way to the table and found two clean glasses and poured highballs. When I returned to where Miss Bennett waited, Tom Pendleton was with her.

Tom was a lean, tight-lipped, hard-bitten man, about the best investigator our office had ever had. At the moment maybe because of the party atmosphere, he was being almost gallant.

"So Cinderella came to the ball," he said.

Miss Bennett flushed deeply. I frowned and handed her a glass. "Am I in the way here?" I asked.

"Oh, no," she said quickly. "After all—" She broke off and stared past me.

Crystal Kent had entered the room. Her husband wasn't with her.

She swept across the room like a queen among her courtiers. She had the build and the bearing for it, and both were enhanced by a white evening gown that hadn't much to it above the waist, except Crystal, and she had everything.

Tildsley rushed forward to greet her. So did a number of other men.

"She's gorgeous," Miss Bennett said distastefully.

"Don't you like her?" I asked.

"No."

Tom Pendleton said moodily, "I guess no woman does. She's a man's woman."

I excused myself and went over to pay my respect to the chief's wife.

For a couple of hours it was all confusion. People came and went. I spent a lot of time near the liquor table. Now and then I thought of Miss Bennett, but Tom Pendleton seemed to be taking care of her. They sat together against the wall, remote, neither drinking nor appearing to be talking. I kept telling myself that I ought to go over to her, but instead I hovered at the fringe of the group of men that always clustered about Crystal Kent.

I drank and brooded over how lonely a man can be at a party. After a while, I went to the sun porch where I could be by myself. It seemed only a second before the double french doors opened and closed, and Crystal was there with me.

An orange-tipped hand reached for my highball. "Thanks, Hank," she said and raised the glass to her orange mouth.

Crystal stood close to me. Her bare shoulders and throat were richly smooth. She tilted her eyes up to me, and they were very bright; obviously she'd had too much to drink. I thought of what Tildsley had implied that morning, about the love between her and her husband being dead.

"Hank," she said, "you're the only one here who doesn't bore me."

I kissed her. She was the chief's wife, but I was drunk with whiskey and with her beauty, and this was what I had wanted for a long time. She put her arms around me.

That was when the chief pulled open the French doors opening off the living-room.

He had come to the party after all, and somebody must have told him that his wife had gone out to the sun porch.

IT HAD become very quiet. I could see into the other room, and a sea of faces wavered there. Some I could distinguish—Miss Bennett's and Tom's and Tildsley's; but they were like faces in water. Only the face of Orville Kent, my chief, was terribly clear.

He stood framed in the doorway—a short, broad man, still wearing his hat and topcoat. His face was broad, too, and fleshy. It was almost always expressive, but at that moment, it was empty, as empty as the face of a man who has just died.

"I'm taking you home, Crystal," he said tonelessly.

Her arms were no longer around me. I didn't remember her stepping away, but now she stood a short distance off. One corner of the sensuous mouth I had kissed had a twist that said "The-hell-with-it!" She said, "So long, Hank," and moved out of the sun porch. Her husband turned, and together they crossed the living-room.

I waited a minute or two before leaving the sun porch. Voices broke off when I appeared.

Tildsley stepped to my side. "Couldn't you have shown more sense?" he said furiously.

I moved on without replying. In the hall I passed Tom.

"Tough break, Hank," he said with unexpected sympathy.

I went upstairs for my topcoat. When I returned, Miss Bennett, in hat and coat, was waiting for me at the foot of the stairs. I had completely forgotten that I had brought her to the party.

"Remember me?" she said in a voice that quivered. "I'm the girl you escorted here."

"You needn't leave yet. Tom will be glad to drive you home."

"I prefer to leave now," she said, "if you can manage to feel kind enough to me to drive me home."

In a way, of course, I had insulted her. I was in the doghouse with everybody.

We walked out together, though not by any means close to each other, and in the car she sat as far from me as she could get. Once I thought she was sobbing, but when I glanced at her face, it was static in the dim light from the dash. She must merely have drawn in a deep breath.

At her door I said, "I'm sorry, Miss Bennett."

"You have your nerve!" she said. "Damn you!"

She poked her key into the lock. I said good night, but her answer was to slam the door in my face. . . .

THE phone woke me. I was used to that. As assistant district attorney, I generally rolled with the homicide squad.

Right off I knew that this had to be a big case because the voice I heard was that of the chief of detectives himself, Captain George Diller.

"Hank, come to 649 Perry Street," he said.

"Okay, as soon as I—" Abruptly I was wide awake. "What was that address?"

"Yeah, the D.A.'s house," he said glumly. "Somebody pumped lead into Crystal Kent's heart."

"Somebody!" I croaked.

"What a mess!" He hung up.

My clock said ten minutes after one. Crystal had kissed me only two hours ago.

A crowd was already gathering outside the one-story brick house on the placid street. A detective led me into a little study off the living room. I took one look at the crumpled pink-and-white form on the floor and turned my head away.

I thought of what Tildsley had said about a corpse of love in this house. Only now it was a physical corpse.

The lab men were busy with their cameras and dusting powders and tape measures. They moved without sound and spoke in low tones when they spoke at all. You could see that this was one job they hated.

"Where's Mr. Kent?" I asked Captain George Diller.

He took his cigar out of his fat face. He and the chief played gin rummy together. He looked angry, as if he considered it unfair to be officially involved.

"No idea," he snapped. "Half an hour ago the people next door heard a scream and then a shot. They called the police. No sign of Kent when a couple of prowl cars got here."

I forced myself to look down at her. She wore only a pink nylon nightgown, practically transparent, and a pair of furred slippers. Somehow I kept thinking of her as a vibrantly alive woman, but a bullet hole and ragged trailers of blood marred the nylon over her left breast.

"Looks like he mauled her first," Captain Diller was saying. "See those marks on her face?"

Three parallel livid scratches ran from the right eye to the orange mouth. I could still feel the warmth of that ardent mouth kissing me.

"Recognize the gun?" Captain Diller asked me.

The snub-nosed .32 Colt automatic was some five feet from a bare knee.

Dully I nodded. "That's no proof."

"Would she walk about the house in only that sheer nightie if anybody but her husband was here?"

I went to the window. The study faced the street which had been violently awakened by murder. Captain Diller was at my side, explaining to me why it couldn't have been a thief who had grabbed her husband's gun from her and shot her with it. Because, he said, if she had heard a stranger in the house she would have used the bedside phone to bring a prowl car in two minutes; and because a thief might have punched her to knock her out, but not just scratched her face.

I hardly listened. Here I was, representing the district attorney's office, and I was withholding vital information. There was no point to it, either. Too many people at Tildsley's party had seen me kissing Crystal Kent when her husband had thrown open the french doors. Diller would know about it soon enough.

SO I told him. His florid face stiffened when I mentioned the kiss, and there were mixed emotions in his eyes—pity for

Orville Kent and contempt for me, among others.

"This is the way it figures," he said at last. "After they got home, they argued while undressing for bed. For some reason they came into this room, she in her nightgown, still battling. He had plenty of reason to be crazy mad. Maybe she said something that made him lose his head completely. He scratched her face and then snatched his gun out of wherever it was and shot her. What a mess!"

Suddenly Orville Kent was standing in the study doorway.

He looked exactly as he had a couple of hours ago when he'd pulled open those french doors—still wearing the slouch hat and topcoat, his broad face still empty. For a long moment he didn't lift his eyes from his dead wife. No one in the room seemed to breathe.

Then he said apathetically, "That's my gun. I kept it in the desk." He shifted his gaze to me, and I couldn't meet it. "Did you tell the captain about Tildsley's party, Hank?"

I nodded.

"I drove Crystal home," he said woodenly. "I decided that I had taken enough from her, but I had to think it through. I dropped her off at the house and drove on."

"Where to?" Diller asked.

"Nowhere in particular. I had to think. I got back only a minute ago." He ran a hand over his face. "I don't suppose you believe that."

"I don't know," Diller said unhappily. "What would you do if you were on this case?"

A very tired smile touched the edges of the chief's mouth.

He spoke slowly. "Try to pin it on the obvious suspect." He pulled his broad shoulders back and buttoned his topcoat. "Hank, take charge of the office. You're acting district attorney now."

He walked out of the room—no longer the chief.

Captain Diller nodded to a homicide sergeant. Orville Kent waited beyond the door, and when the sergeant reached him they walked out of the house together. It was done quietly, unobtrusively, but it was an arrest. Arrest for murder of the man whose job it was to send murderers to the electric chair.

I was left with the official duty of proving him guilty of a murder for which I was in a way morally responsible.

It was late when I got to the office that morning. Most of the staff was gathered glumly in the outer office—the two other assistants and the stenographers and a couple of bureau detectives. Their voices broke off when I entered, and it wasn't because I had suddenly become their boss.

They must have heard about that kiss last night and like everybody else they were blaming me for the subsequent mess.

Gravely I nodded good morning and crossed the room. Miss Bennett sat off by herself at her desk. Her handkerchief was up to her face. I went over to her and put a hand on her shoulder and said, "Look—about last night. I didn't—"

She twisted away from me knocked my hand off her shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" she said.

ALL the others in the office were watching that. I wished I had something to crawl under, preferably a rock. Stiffly I walked away from her.

Alfred Tildsley and Tom Pendleton were waiting for me in my office. Tildsley was pacing the room. He hadn't shaved that morning, which for the suave lawyer was startling.

"I'm representing Orville Kent," he told me briskly. Then he got as pugnacious as when he was bullying a witness. "This is outrageous. You are an interested party, not to mention being indirectly involved. You have no right to be prosecutor in this case."

I sat down at my desk. Tom was sitting against the wall, his long legs stretched out, his bleak eyes regarding me without emotion. He hadn't even said hello to me.

I hadn't a friend in the world.

"You loved Crystal Kent," Tildsley went on. "You'll be out for my client's blood."

"No," I said. "I haven't a thing against him."

He snorted. "If you don't disqualify your-

self, I'll go to the governor."

"I'm disqualifying myself, all right," I said, "clear out of this office. In short, I'm resigning."

Tom, deadpan, lit a cigarette. Tildsley stopped pacing and nodded.

"You haven't room in your office for a bright young attorney?" I asked Tildsley, trying to be flippant.

"You!" he sneered. "After the way you conducted yourself in my house last night, I wouldn't give you a job sweeping the floor."

Up to then I'd been strictly on the defensive, but now I got sore. "You're hardly the guy to start getting moral. If I know you, you're burned up because she kissed me instead of you."

Tildsley got white around the mouth. I'd been guessing because of his reputation, and I'd hit home.

He said, "I'm not going to bandy words with you," and left.

I picked up my pencil and bounced it on the blotter. Tom reached over to the ash-tray on my desk.

After a minute he said reflectively, "D.A.'s can come and go, but I have a job of investigating to do. Who gives me my orders, Hank?"

"I'll phone the governor and ask him to appoint a new acting D.A. Meanwhile, I'm still here. What do you think you've got?"

"Well," he said slowly, "I was just down to the lab and learned that the murder gun had been wiped clean."

"So what? There's not a chance in a hundred that a hand gun will take a finger-print that can be read."

"Uh-huh, but it was wiped clean after the shooting to make sure there wasn't that chance. The point is, why would Mr. Kent wipe his gun and then leave it there?"

I stopped bouncing the pencil. "I get it. If he had enough self-possession to wipe the gun after the shooting, he'd have enough self-possession to take it away with him and get rid of it."

Tom nodded. "Food for thought, isn't it?"

I stood up. I said, "Follow that up, Tom," and left the office and the building.

I walked three blocks to the county jail. Facing my ex-chief at all would be bad enough; I couldn't do it in a cell. So I had him brought to a bare little room we used for questioning prisoners.

Orville Kent came in and looked at me without hostility. He muttered tiredly, "Good-morning, Hank," and sat down on a wooden chair and started to load his pipe.

I didn't know what to do with my hands. I took out my pocket handkerchief and wiped the sweat off them. Then I said, "Both Crystal and I were a little drunk last night. There had never been anything between us."

He shrugged apathetically. "I don't blame you. I know what Crystal could do to a man."

I drew in my breath. "Did you kill her?"

"No."

"I think you'd admit it if you did."

"Yes," he said. "I think I would."

"There's another thing," I said. "The murder gun was wiped clean by the killer."

His head snapped up. He was too old a hand to need further explanation. His blue eyes came alive, the old brightness glinted in them. He looked at me a long time, incisively and curiously, until I squirmed inwardly.

"Of course, that's not enough to clear you," I said uneasily. "I'm afraid we'll still have to hold you."

"Obviously." As he sucked his pipe, a vague smile plucked the corners of his mouth. "Hank, would you mind asking Captain Diller to come to see me?"

"Why wouldn't I do?"

"I'd like to see Captain Diller," he said and stood up to return to his cell.

WHEN I got back to the office, I found that there was plenty of business besides last night's murder. I was acting chief now; I had all the crime in the county on my shoulders. I spent an hour trying to get out from under routine.

Miss Bennett came in to take dictation. I had been about to send for one of the other girls, but there was no point trying to hide from her. She was remote and formal, keeping her eyes on the pad; that was about the best I could have expected from her.

She wore a knitted blue dress that made her figure very trim. She wasn't quite as pretty as last night, but I had been cured of a taste for stunningly beautiful women. A man could get to be very fond of her.

I finished dictating, and she went out. Then I sat back and gave myself over to wondering what Orville Kent had wanted with Captain Diller. He'd had that eager look he got when he was cooking up something.

My answer came a few minutes later. Three men filed into my office—Captain Diller in the lead, then Tildsley, then Tom Pendleton morosely bringing up the rear.

Tildsley grinned. "So you're still here?"

"I've changed my mind about resigning," I told him. "I'm going to hang around until I send Crystal Kent's murderer to the chair."

"So?" he said. "You're determined to pin it on her husband."

"Not unless he did it, and I don't think he did." I looked at Captain Diller. "Of course, you heard about the gun's having been wiped clean."

Unaccountably, that seemed to amuse Diller. He rolled his cigar between his fat lips and then said, "I heard more. I heard you've got a gun just like Kent's."

"I as well as the two other assistant D.A.'s," I said. "We're always getting threats from guys we send up, and a few months ago the chief bought four identical .32 Colt automatics. He gave us each one to carry for protection and kept the fourth for himself."

"Do you carry yours?" Diller asked.

"Not often. Guns are a nuisance, as we soon found out. The chief himself kept his at home in his desk. Mine's in the glove compartment of my car."

"Is it?" Tildsley said and laughed.

I started getting cold. If I had a friend in that room, it wasn't Tildsley or Captain Diller. I looked at Tom Pendleton. Tight-lipped, he was standing at the window, apparently more interested in the street below than in what was going on inside.

"Isn't it?" I said.

Diller moved closer to my desk. "All right, we've horsed around enough. You're gun isn't in your car, Hank, because it's in the police lab. It's the gun that killed Crystal Kent; and there's no doubt it's yours because the number is registered in your name."

I asked, "Where's Kent's gun?"

"In his desk where it had been all the time. We didn't look for it last night because we assumed the gun on the floor was his. So did he, for that matter. But an hour ago, when he heard the murder gun had been wiped, Kent got an idea. He told me you had a gun like his. We checked and here we are."

Tildsley slapped his palms together. "Leave it to Orville Kent to solve a murder while he's in jail."

I said, "Tom, is this on the level? Were you present when the gun registration was checked?"

He nodded without turning his head. He was one, at least, I trusted.

I sat back in my swivel chair and tried to look merely annoyed. "I don't see how that solves anything, except that we have to release Orville Kent."

"Naturally you wouldn't want it solved," Tildsley said nastily. "What happened last night is obvious. You visited Crystal Kent after the party and you soon found out that she hadn't meant anything by that kiss in my house an hour before. You slapped her around then shot her."

I IGNORED him. I asked Diller, "Captain, do you think I would have left my gun there if I'd shot her?"

"The fact is, your gun did it."

"Uh-huh," I said. "It was in my car, and my car was outside Tildsley's house last night during the party. Anybody could have slipped outside for a moment and taken it. Kent when he left the house, or anybody else who had been there. The fact that my gun was used doesn't point to me any more than to others."

Tildsley put his hands on my desk. "Do you mean to say that you propose to stay on as acting district attorney while you are, to say the least, under suspicion of murder?"

"Tildsley," I said tiredly, "shut up and

beat it. Your interest ends with the release of your client." I turned to Diller. "I suppose Kent will resume his job as D.A. when he's released. I go back to assistant until he fires me. Meanwhile I have a job of work to do. Good day, gentlemen."

Maybe it was childishly dramatic, but I had to make an exit before I said too much. I left my office through the side door that opened into the hall.

My car was around the corner, but I walked the two blocks to Perry Street. A uniformed cop let me into the Kent house.

I went into the study and looked out of the window that faced the street. From the sidewalk to the porch steps there was an unobstructed view. I turned back to the room. In my mind, I saw Crystal Kent, stately and full-bodied in that sheer nylon nightgown, and I saw those three scratches from her right eye to the corner of her mouth. She had kissed me and because of it she was dead.

I knew what I had to do, but I wasn't doing it. Not for a long time, anyway. Presently I roused myself and walked back to the office.

It was still fairly early in the afternoon, but the office was unusually empty. Only the switchboard girl and one of the stenographers were there. From them I learned that Orville Kent had been released from jail and had looked in for a minute and then left.

Miss Bennett had complained of a sick headache and Tom Pendleton had offered to take her home.

All at once I was in a hurry. I used my car this time. I drove to a small apartment house and walked up one flight of stairs and rang a bell.

There was no answer. I tried the door, found it locked and rang the bell some more. I was about to turn away when I heard a fumbling on the other side of the door and it opened.

Miss Bennett's mouth went slack at the sight of me.

"Is Tom here?" I said.

"He—he—" She had trouble with her voice. "No!" she managed to blurt. "I'm resting. Please go away."

I pushed past her and crossed the small square hall. There was only one room to the apartment, and Tom Pendleton was in it.

He stood with both hands gripping the back of a chair. A valise, half-filled with feminine clothing, was on the table. A couple of dresser drawers were open.

I said, "Were you planning to go with her, Tom?"

"She wouldn't have me," he said, and his bitterness was like a sickness .

"Tom, I didn't mean it that way," Miss Bennett said brokenly. She slumped down on the day bed.

"So you love her, Tom?" I said.

He laughed without any change in his hard-bitten face. "Funny, isn't it? I love her and she loves you. You never gave her a tumble, but still she kept eating her heart out for you. Then yesterday you discovered she was alive and took her to Tildsley's party." He let go of the chair. "Damn you, Hank! You took Hilda to a party and then ignored her and kissed another woman."

SO HILDA was Miss Bennett's first name, was my absent thought. Even last night I hadn't taken the trouble to learn it. How could I have known that that quiet, remote girl had cared about me? If she had been less shy, if she had let me know, everything would have turned out differently.

"You figured it out the way I did," I said. "First of all, those scratches on Crystal Kent's face. We spoke of her having been mauled, but those scratches were made by sharp fingernails—a woman's weapon. Then there was the fact that she was with the killer in the study in a transparent nightgown. She wouldn't have been like that with any man but her husband. Not even with a lover, for she couldn't know when her husband would suddenly come home. It had to be another woman. From the study window she could see a visitor coming up the walk, and because it was a woman she didn't bother to go to the bedroom for a robe. And who easier than Hilda Bennett could have got my gun? She was in my car when I drove her home from the party."

Tom said, "It was your fault, Hank. You paid attention to her yesterday for the first

time and then dropped her for Mrs. Kent. Do you understand how deeply a girl like Hilda can feel, how much it meant to her to be with you at last? Then when Mrs. Kent arrived at the party—" His hands opened and closed. "She wasn't rational. All she could see was that Mrs. Kent was taking you away from her."

Hunched over on the bed, Hilda Bennett was sobbing softly.

I wet my lips and tried to find words.

"There's no evidence that will hold up," Tom said, "but I knew she couldn't hold out against questioning. I had to get her away before you caught on. Hank, give her a break. She didn't know what she was doing."

"Didn't she?" I said. "She knew enough to steal my gun, and after she wiped it, she knew enough to leave it by the body so the crime would be pinned on me."

"Because, loving you, she hated you. Hank, you of all people can't turn her in."

I said dully, "It was murder."

Tom Pendleton stepped back from the chair and put his hand under his jacket and took out his gun. He was an investigator and carried a gun in the line of duty, so it was bigger than the ones the chief and I owned. The black muzzle was focused unwaveringly on my heart.

I wondered if he would shoot and I didn't much care. I was bone-tired and so sorry for both of them—these two who loved deeply and quietly, but unfortunately, not each other.

"You're going to give her a start," he said. "You're going to stay here with me all night and maybe longer. She has to have a chance."

"No, Tom," Miss Bennett said.

She was on her feet, her eyes dry, her sweet little face set. "It's no use, Tom. I can't run away."

"Hilda, use your head."

She smiled sadly and said, "I can't run away from myself." She went to the closet and put on a gray tweed coat and a little gray hat with a high red feather sticking up from it.

We watched her pause at the dresser mirror to apply a spat of powder to each wan cheek. She looked very trim. She looked like a girl it would have been very pleasant to love. Only now it was too late for anything.

"Good-by, Tom," she said and walked out of the room. I heard her in the hall, opening the door.

Tom Pendleton dropped into a chair and put his head in his hands. I followed her out of the apartment.

Next Issue

Reunion With Darkness

A Novel of

Today's Underworld

By WILLIAM DEGENHARD

●

Men Without Women

A Shocking Revelation!

A man who's been dead seven years gives reporter Craig a handful of coffin nails and sends him on a strange—

Quest for a Corpse

Chapter I

WHEN Allen Craig found the platinum cuff link he felt like a man who has returned home from a dinner party and discovers that his trousers are unzipped. It couldn't be—but it very definitely was.

He looked at it more closely, peering to read the inscription engraved diagonally in italics across the expensive surface. It read, as he had known it must: CM from MLM, love Aug 11 1941.

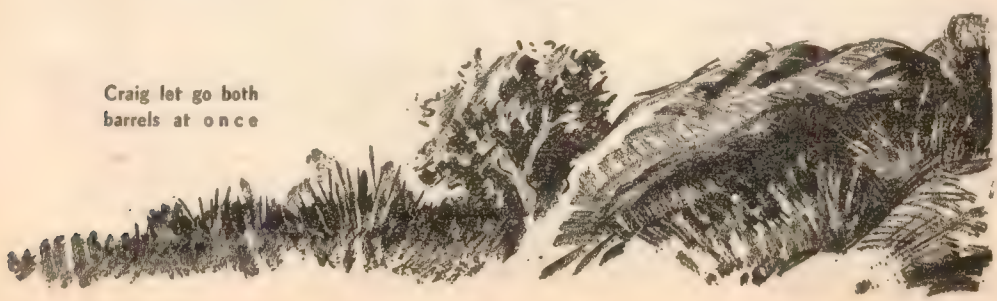
He looked at the other sleeve of the shirt which had been lying so innocently in the middle drawer of the bureau. The matching link was there, of course. The shirt itself, white, and bearing the name of a national shirtmaker, was either freshly laundered or new, with the pins, cardboard and tissue paper removed.

It was like seeing an Egyptian mummy walk. Craig uttered a sharp and incredulous obscenity and sat down hard on the bed. It couldn't be—but it was. After seven long years, Caleb Markham, long-vanished special district attorney of Bay City, fifteen hundred miles away, had come back to life in a room of the Greenwood Inn, fifteen miles from Lake Superior.

Markham had worn those cuff links on the September evening he had driven from his comfortable suburban home to keep a mysterious date and had never been seen again. Or so his wife had stated when questioned by police and reporters shortly after her husband's disappearance. Five years later she had died in a car-crash—alone.

Allen Craig was going to have to report the finding of the cuff links at once to his boss, Manning Freeman, publisher of the *Bay City Gazette*. On the eve of Markham's being declared officially dead Craig had been assigned to cover again the entire case, to visit every town and city in which, over the years, Caleb Markham had purportedly been seen. It had been a tiring and thankless task—until now. Greenwood could be the end of the trail.

According to the newspaper morgue clippings Markham was originally an archeologist by intent. He had taken a law degree in order to be better able to deal with various officials should any expedition on which he embarked turn up valuable relics. An early marriage and an ambitious wife had turned him first to the succesful practice of law,



Craig let go both barrels at once

then to politics, finally to oblivion.

There were diggings of some sort near Greenwood—Allen was in the process of finding out about them—and Markham had quite reliably been reported as having been in the vicinity shortly after his disappearance. Reliably, that is, for rumors of this sort.

Allen removed the links from the shirt and stowed them away securely in a pocket of the money belt he wore under his clothes. He then walked down one flight to the inn lobby.

The inn was not sufficiently large to rate an elevator. But like the community and the pine woods that surrounded it the lobby looked scrubbed and pleasant. There were a dozen comfortable chairs and settees scattered casually about, three writing desks and a pair of tables topped with checkerboards. Beyond, through a double doorway, white napery and silver and crystal glistened and

gleamed invitingly in the bright sunlight that streamed into the dining room.

"Hello, Allen. Fancy meeting you here!" Mary Fennell was sitting on a settee, chatting with Tom Shaw, the archeologist, who commuted between the inn and his diggings, a dozen miles nearer the lake.

MARY'S presence in Greenwood made both a mystery and a mild cause of worry where Craig was concerned. He had met her quite casually in St. Louis the week before, and she had evidently followed him here. Since he had reason to doubt any romantic inclination toward him on her part —though he wished it were otherwise—he could not help wondering as to the why of her presence at the inn.

Her voice was big for such a small girl—big, ironic and under rigid control. In his half dozen encounters with her Craig had got the idea that she was laughing at him. It made him faintly uncomfortable.

"Hello, Mary," he replied evenly. "Should I be surprised?" He studied her for a long moment, marveling at her perfect grooming. At the moment, he was more aware of his own unpressed suit than of her youthful freshness, her feathery dark red hair, the implicit perfection of her figure.

"I was trying to work out some reason for not introducing you two—" Shaw, the archeologist, smiled ruefully behind the white beard and mustache that contrasted so brilliantly with the mahogany tan of his complexion—"but unfortunately you seem to have met already." He sighed, nodded toward an armchair facing the settee, and said, "Sit down, and I'll buy us all a drink."

"Thanks—in a minute," Craig told him. He left them and crossed to the hotel desk, where Mrs. A-for-Azalea Ravenal, who managed the inn, was frowning over her laborious bookkeeping.

Just how a Southern lady of quality had ever managed to wind up running a hotel so far north was a mystery Craig preferred to accept rather than to question. After weeks of travel—from New England to San Diego, to Salt Lake City, to Biloxi, to St. Louis and assorted way-stops in between—the Greenwood Inn, with its high standards of cleanliness, service, comfort, and cuisine, was almost paradise. For once he was in no rush to move on.

"May I do something for you, Mr. Craig?" Mrs. Ravenal's pleasant accents retained the softness of her background.

He opened his mouth to speak, then hesitated as a clear, low gurgle of feminine laughter reached him from the other side of the lobby. Damn that girl! He wished he were sure that she was not laughing at *him*.

"I'd like to speak to you in your office if I may," he said to Mrs. Ravenal.

She gave him a long, alert look and led him into the pleasantly unbusinesslike chintz-and-mahogany room in which she conducted her professional affairs. She was a tall, slender, somewhat-ravaged woman, who, in her youth, must have been a tremendous belle.

"Now," she said, "what can I do for you, Mr. Craig?"

"Two things," he told her frankly. "First, I'd like to know the name of whoever had my room before I did." At her interrogatory glance he explained that he had found something vitally important in his bureau drawer and wished to know who had left it.

"That Sadie!" said Mrs. Ravenal. "She's my very best girl, except when she falls in love—which happens on an average of four times a year." She sighed. "It will take a few minutes. Now, what is your second request, Mr. Craig?"

He told her that he wanted to make a long-distance call to Bay City and that he wanted to make it alone from this—her—room in order to ensure privacy. "I hope you don't think I'm being rude but—"

"Mr. Craig!" Scores of little lines appeared around Mrs. Ravenal's eyes as she laughed. "You don't for a moment imagine any girl on my switchboard would listen in, do you?" She grew serious, said, "Don't worry, I'll give special orders. I'll check the registrations on your other request while you call. You newspapermen!"

"How did you know?" Craig asked. "Am I wearing a badge?"

"Really, Mr. Craig," she told him. "I'm not a complete idiot. We've had a great many reporters at the inn during the last

seven years. I didn't know, of course, but when you said Bay City just now—it's that Markham business, isn't it?"

"You're right," he replied ruefully. "Of course, you'd know."

"I'm afraid you're a trifle late," she told him, rising and moving toward the door. "Almost seven years, Mr. Craig!"

HE WINCED and closed the door after her, sat down at her desk and picked up the phone. Olga, the switchboard girl, had a flat, rather pleasant voice with Swedish overtones. She put the call through for him with swift efficiency. In less than a minute he was talking to Manning Freeman, publisher of the *Bay City Gazette*.

"The damned things must be a plant!" was Freeman's first reaction to news of the cuff links. In his mind's eye, Craig could see his boss scowling at the mouthpiece, chewing savagely on his inevitable unlit cigar.

"Sure they're a plant—have to be," agreed Craig. "But why? Who wants to stir up the case now—especially at such expense? If the things are fakes, they cost plenty, with platinum what it is today and luxury taxes and all. Anyway, it ought to make a story."

"It could be," replied Freeman thoughtfully. "But I can see why someone would go to such expense, someone directly interested. Immediately after Markham's disappearance his estate was listed at over a half million by the surrogate. By now it may be worth twice that much, and that ain't hay in any league."

"Check," said Craig. "But who'd want to pull a play like this one? The links themselves don't prove Markham's still alive."

"They may be a clue to what happened to him if they aren't fakes or copies," said the publisher sagely. "Hell, maybe Markham himself planted them, maybe he heard about your being there and decided he didn't want to be declared legally dead yet.

"Or maybe somebody else is interested in keeping him alive—that daughter of his. She was supposed to have been fond of him. Maybe somebody had him and wants to keep the estate tied up until he's actually dead. How should I know? You're the lad on the scene. How does it smell to you, Craig?"

"Fishy as hell," Craig told his boss. "How do you want me to play it? Are you going to bust it now?"

"Not so you'd notice it, Allen," Freeman said slowly. "Play them close to your chest and keep digging. Happen what may now we'll have a story next month when Markham is declared legally dead. But I've got a hunch there's more—plenty more— beneath the surface. It always was a screwball case."

"Okay," said the reporter. "But I wish there was something I could get my teeth into. I don't mind admitting I'm baffled."

"You're not the only one," Manning Freeman told him. Then he snorted, "Cuff links! Better get pictures of them—no, then some cameraman will know. Just make sure you don't lose them until we decide what to do in the light of any subsequent developments."

"What if there aren't any?" Craig asked pessimistically.

"Don't make me bust out bawling," jeered the publisher. "Get busy and find out who had that room before you got it—not that it's likely to lead us anywhere. Somebody must have planted them for you to find. But find out, anyway. It might give us a lead."

"I'm getting that dope right now," Craig told him. "On the face of it, we won't find out anything. But don't worry, Manning, I intend to keep digging around here until I come up with something."

"Sure, why not?" countered his boss. "Go ahead and have yourself a time. It's free and you're drawing salary, you lucky dog. Turn up one more lead like those cuff links, and I'll tear loose from here and hop a plane myself. Just keep your mouth shut and your eyes and ears open. That ought to do it. Oh, by the way, give my everlasting love to Mrs. Ravenal."

Blinking, Allen Craig hung up. So Freeman himself had worked this angle of the Markham disappearance during his reporting days! It was, he thought, grossly unfair to put a smart ex-reporter in the publisher's chair. Freeman knew too many of the angles.

He picked up the phone again and told

Olga to put the charge for the call on his bill, then went out to the desk and said, "Manning Freeman sends you his everlasting love, Mrs. Ravenal."

THE TINY wrinkles reappeared. "Manning Freenman—so he's your boss, Mr. Craig. I do declare!" Her eyes softened with reminiscence, and she chuckled softly. "Mr. Freeman was an awfully nice man, and a smart one too, but he was so-o-o-o romantic. *Goodness!*"

Craig hooted. He couldn't help it. The idea of such an ursine, cigar-chewing figure as hulking Manning Freeman making a pass at any creature as delicate and refined as Mrs. Ravenal was almost more than he could believe, or resist. Fortunately, Mrs. Ravenal seemed to understand perfectly the motive for his mirth. She laughed with him as she consulted a slip of paper in her hand.

"The man in two-seventeen before you came, Mr. Craig, was a Mr. Ole Mansen from St. Paul. He comes every April and every August. I believe he's in some sort of lumber machinery. Before Mr. Mansen, the tenant was a Mrs. Delphine Mortimer of Sault Sainte Marie. She was here to visit her granddaughter, who was gradua—"

"I believe we can skip Mrs. Mortimer," said Craig with a sigh. "Who had the room before she came here?"

"The painters, I believe," Mrs. Ravenal told him gravely. "You see, we had the whole inn redecorated last May, Mr. Craig."

Zero, he thought, and wondered how he had the nerve to be disappointed. A Mr. Ole Mansen in lumber machinery and Mrs. Delphine Mortimer—it seemed quite unlikely that the ghost of Caleb Markham could lurk beneath any such prosaic exteriors.

He thanked both Mrs. Ravenal and the straw-haired Olga for their efficient service and strolled out into the lobby. Tom Shaw and Mary Fennell were waiting for him over a trio of frosted tumblers sprigged with mint.

Chapter II

BOTH Shaw and Mary Fennell looked at Craig with some curiosity when he sat down. The girl, turning to Shaw, said, "It must have been funny business, don't you think, Mr. Shaw?"

"I agree," he said, smiling through his white beard. "And please don't call me Mister, my dear. My given name is Tom."

"'You are old, Father William,'" Craig quoted.

He dipped into his drink, which was a planter's punch and excellent. Although he had spoken lightly, the girl worried him. She had more or less moved in on him back in St. Louis—not in any emotional way, for she simply wasn't the type, but it had been a move-in none the less.

One evening when he came down to dinner, she had been sitting at his table. They had chatted, and since Craig was playing them close to his chest, he had not been able to pump her. He doubted that he could have. Mary Fennell had been as uncommunicative as he in regard to her background and purpose.

In the course of taking her, during the rest of his stay, to a movie, the Municipal Opera, and a roof garden for dancing, he had received a very definite idea that she knew a good deal about him. She looked and talked and had the poise of a recent post-debutante from some major Eastern City.

He had kissed her once in a cab when they were returning from their last date. She had responded, and for a moment Craig had thought things might develop; but his further advances were repulsed with her unanswerable mocking irony. It had disturbed him more than it had piqued him, for he had discovered, to his surprise, that his feeling for Mary went much deeper than he had thought.

Naturally he had considered the possibility of her being a rival reporter, following his trail in search of a beat. But since any news beat on the tale of a seven-year-old disappearance had seemed unlikely that idea had amused Craig.

Now, since his discovery of the cuff links, since Mary's inexplicable arrival here at the inn, he was definitely worried. Something was very, very rotten in Denmark—or in Northern Michigan. His peace of mind was

not increased by the fact that his pulses had taken a definite leap at sight of her.

He gave her a direct look as he set down his glass and saw that the mockery in her hazel eyes had been replaced by something close to fear. Turning his head to follow her gaze, he saw a tall, saturnine, immaculately tailored individual just swinging away from the desk.

As their eyes met, the newcomer halted briefly. His left arm half rose in an apparently involuntary gesture that might have been meant as a salute or a menace. Then the eyes of the saturnine man slid away from his to the girl, and a faint smile made a chevron of his lips. Then the man was following the inn's lone bellhop toward the stairway and his room.

"You saw—" Mary Fennell said breathlessly. "Do you know who that man is?" At Craig's negative, she added with a frown, "I know I saw him several times in St. Louis."

"Getting to be quite a parade, isn't it?" said Craig, but he was puzzled too. There was something familiar about the man, and Craig was sure it had nothing to do with St. Louis.

"Yes, isn't it?" the girl murmured and Craig noted with definite satisfaction that she blushed. He rose abruptly, crossed to the desk, said, "Mrs. Ravenal, are you sure that that man's name was Mansen—Ole Mansen?"

"I'm positive, Mr. Craig," she replied, then swung the register toward him so that he could see the name the saturnine newcomer had signed. Above it, Craig noted Mary Fennell's name and room number. There was the suggestion of a smile on Mrs. Ravenal's lips.

"Thanks ever so much, Mrs. Ravenal," said Craig, retreating to the girl and the archeologist with his tail between his legs, figuratively speaking. To the girl he said tonelessly, "It was a Mr. Johannes Schmidt of St. Louis—that's what it said."

"I must confess I'm puzzled," said Tom Shaw.

"And I'm absolutely bewildered," said the girl. "I'm sure—"

"As for me, I'm embarrassed," the reporter told her.

"Let's eat, and then I'll drive you out to my diggings," the archeologist offered. "You two seem to have a lot on your mind. Perhaps a look at lost history will restore a few relative values. Take my word for it, nothing is very important in the long view."

"I'm afraid I'm nearsighted, Tom," Mary Fennell said with a smile. "I'd love to have lunch with you gentlemen but I'm afraid I'll have to beg off from the trip."

NOT even the cooking of Mrs. Ravenal's chef could soften her. Craig did not mind too much, professionally at any rate. He wanted to ask the archeologist some questions.

The bearded Tom Shaw proved to be a fast but steady driver. As they bounced over the rutted twelve miles to his diggings he told the reporter something of what to expect upon their arrival. Craig had already learned that his host was a fascinating talker.

Shaw, it seemed, had become convinced early in life that the Vikings had discovered the St. Lawrence waterway during the Lief Ericsson era, had portaged Niagara Falls, had moved on into the Great Lakes region and ultimately made a settlement in northern Michigan.

"Plenty of relics have been found in Minnesota," he told Craig as they cut through the pine forest. "It has always been my theory that the Minnesota settlement had to have a base, and the tip of northern Michigan seemed the most likely place."

"Have you found anything to prove your theory, Tom?"

"Plenty. I'm just about ready to open up with it. I scouted around here on the strength of some records I picked up in Trondheim—old Norse records—and got a pretty good idea of where the settlement was. I was then able to buy up the land and get to my work in secret. But you'll see—"

"Wasn't Caleb Markham, the Bay City special district attorney who disappeared almost seven years ago, interested in the same sort of thing?" Craig asked quietly.

Shaw looked at him so long that he almost missed a turn and ran them into the forest. "So that's it," he said. "That old mess is

going to be dug up again." He shook his head.

"Did you know Caleb Markham?" the reporter asked softly.

"I knew *a* Caleb Markham," the archeologist replied. "I very much doubt that he was the man Bay City knew as a crusading D.A. This Caleb Markham was a frustrated archeologist, a born scholar forced into a groove and way of life he came to hate."

"Then you've seen him since—since his disappearance?"

"I didn't say that. I went to Harvard with this Caleb Markham," said Shaw. "I knew him for years afterward—by correspondence."

Somehow Craig knew he would get nothing more unless he used shock tactics. So he used them, saying, "Today I found incontroverible evidence that Cabel Markham is still alive and somewhere around here." It was not strictly true, but he wanted an effect.

He got it. With a squeal of brakes the station wagon jerked to a stop. Tom Shaw peered at him, his beard bristling. "What was this proof?" he inquired. "Are you trying to kid me, Craig?"

"Hardly," said the reporter. "I found something back at the inn, that's all."

"What?" The question cracked like an Australian bull whip.

"The cuff links Markham was wearing when he disappeared," said Craig and could have bitten his tongue out. But Tom Shaw merely snorted, said, "Impossible!" and got the car going again.

He resumed his lecture on his archeological findings, and Craig could not budge him again. But the reporter could sense the strain underneath Shaw's glibness. With a sense of mounting excitement Craig realized that he had opened up something wide.

AFTER passing through a trimly painted white gate, where the rutty road turned off, they progressed perhaps a quarter of a mile over a neat sanded driveway to a circle in front of a low, comfortable-looking lodge of hewn logs from whose chimney smoke drifted gently against the pastel blue sky. Shaw braked to a halt, honked, and got out of the car in a hurry. A broad, apple-cheeked woman in a bright Scandinavian blouse, a full skirt, and apron, appeared in the door.

"Hedda," said the archeologist, "is Charley anywhere around?"

"No, Mister Shaw, he went to town this morning," was the reply in broad Norwegian accents and accompanied by a smile. Before the reporter reached them, Shaw and the woman had exchanged a few words in Scandinavian. The archeologist turned politely to Craig.

"I wanted Charley to show you around with me," he said, "but he's gone into town on an errand. I'm afraid I've got to go after him. Mike Molinski will take you on the tour. If you're afraid of being stranded, there's a Ford in the garage that Mike will take you to town in. He's my top digger."

It happened so fast that before Craig could get his second wind he found himself being conducted along a well-trodden woodland path by a huge dark man with the shoulders and heavy grace of a professional football player.

At any other time the reporter would have been interested, even impressed, by what the head digger had to show him. One whole side of an oddly shaped low mound in a woodland clearing had been laid open to reveal the ruins of stone dwellings, a great number of carefully sheltered iron artifacts, that ranged from heavy cooking pots to spearheads, and a curious shuttle-shaped erosion in the ground that Molinski insisted was a Viking longboat.

"Eight hundred years ago this was the lake shore," the head digger informed him. "There was a sort of cove here. Since then the lake has receded until it's almost three miles north of us."

Craig tried to hurry Molinski along without revealing his impatience but with little success. When at last they got back to the log house the apple-cheeked woman, whose name, surprisingly enough, proved to be Mrs. McKay, insisted on serving them crumbcake and coffee.

IT WAS six o'clock when Mike Molinski, who really had played football for both

Minnesota and the Green Bay Packers, got the Ford out to drive him back to town. That the big fellow proved to be a fast driver when he at last got under way proved small consolation. By this time Mike was looking forward to an unexpected night in and—Craig suspected—on the town.

"I'm sure glad you showed, Mr. Craig," he said, glowing. "I like working for Mr. Shaw okay, but it's kinda isolated. And I know a couple of cousins in Greenwood—gal cousins, that is—who need plenty of care or they'll get out of hand."

When Craig reached the hotel Olga, who was still on the switchboard, informed him that there was a call in for him from Bay City.

"I'll take it upstairs," he told her. "I've picked up all the dust this side of Milwaukee. Can you get this suit cleaned for me in a hurry?"

Olga said she would certainly try, and Craig thanked her and looked around the lobby. It was empty, although the sounds coming from the dining room informed him that the hotel had not suddenly become deserted. He thought of going in but the lack of any air of suspense about the place made him decide to go up and take his call without delay.

Craig walked up to his room, turned the key, and found that the door was locked. He turned the key again, found the door now unlocked. Evidently it had been unlocked in the first place. Mildly puzzled—he might have forgotten to lock it himself or one of the maids might have been negligent—he pushed it open, started to enter and stopped dead.

The place was a shambles. The bed had been torn apart, the bureau drawers removed, emptied and tossed around heedlessly, his suitcase all but ripped to shreds and dumped in a corner. But it was not just the wreckage that caught and held his gaze. Inescapably his attention was drawn to the great splashes of darkening crimson that streaked and spotted and sprayed floor and carpet, wrecked furniture and walls. Its source came from a pathetic, crumpled heap by the closet door.

Mrs. A-for-Azalea Ravenal was dead—

Chapter III

LIEUTENANT Nels Carver, his face almost as weathered as Tom Shaw's, of the Michigan State Constabulary looked steadily at Craig across the late Mrs. Ravenal's office desk. He was a quietly insistent officer who moved with the wary assurance of the good pro.

"And that's all, Mr. Craig?" he asked.

"That's all to date," the reporter told him. "Apparently Mrs. Ravenal did listen in and decided to do some scouting for my find when she knew I was out with Tom Shaw."

"And apparently someone else had the same idea," said the lieutenant. He picked up one of the cuff links and shook his head slowly. "God knows who she may have told," he said. "You sure have kicked up a mess with this job. How come they're making such a fuss about Markham at this late date?"

Craig told him, emphasizing how important the case still was in Bay City, even in a national, news sense. "It's the biggest disappearance since Judge Crater, Lieutenant. A month from now—even if this hadn't happened—the name of Caleb Markham would have been spread all over the land. He's about due to be declared officially dead."

"Seems like he's been dead a long time already, Mr. Craig. How did you happen to draw this assignment?"

Craig explained how, three months earlier, he had drawn a routine feature assignment to interview Harry Dennis, the man who ran Bay City. He was also the man who had married Markham's widow after she had divorced her husband for desertion and who had adopted the Markhams' daughter, Denise, whose godfather he had been. Mrs. Markham had been killed, or had killed herself, two years ago on the fifth anniversary of her first husband's vanishing.

"I was early," Craig told him. "I walked around the place—it's a whopper, with a walled garden that covers an entire block—and I saw a man come out a side gate. It was dark, and he turned toward me, then saw me and went the other way."

"Is this important?" the lieutenant asked.

Craig shrugged. "I wouldn't know. I'm trying to level. I didn't get a good look at him but when I rang the bell and apologized for being early and mentioned seeing him, Harry Dennis was quite disturbed. He said no one had been there. Then he gave me a good story—no new stuff but good feature material—and I wrote it up the next day at the office."

"And?" The lieutenant sounded only mildly interested.

"Three days later I got an assignment from Manning Freeman, my publisher." Craig went on to tell of the fantastic assignment: that he was to follow down every Caleb Markham lead so that the case could finally be laid to rest or reopened before Markham was declared legally dead.

"It matters," he concluded, "because Markham was on the verge of blowing the town wide open when he vanished. He had a blue ribbon jury working with him, and the racketeers were in a panic. His disappearance blew things apart, anyway.

"I've done a lot of traveling—all over the country—and here I am in Michigan. I've run down seventy-three leads and until today I haven't even stirred up dirt, much less paydirt."

"And that's that?" said the lieutenant. He tossed the links in the air, put them away in his pocket. "Don't suppose there's any use looking for fingerprints at this late date. Don't worry about Tom Shaw. We know where to find him if we want him."

Craig lifted a hand in farewell, and went out to the lobby and called Bay City from the booth there. The one thing he had not mentioned to Freeman was Mary Fennell. Also, there was the saturnine man who had arrived that afternoon. He intended to have that out with Mary alone.

He was not hungry—the sight of poor Mrs. Ravenal's knifegashed body had killed his appetite temporarily. All he wanted to do was get Mary Fennell alone and get a few facts from her. He had some burgeoning theories about her he wanted to pin down, too.

She was sitting on the same settee—this time alone. The mystery girl was showing strain now. Her smile looked pasted on as one of the other guests nodded to her in passing. Rouge, hitherto unnoticed, stood out garishly on her cheeks.

WHILE Craig waited near the office door for the other guest to get out of earshot, the man who had signed himself Johannes Schmidt of St. Louis, emerged from the dining room. His dark eyes lit up, and he moved toward the reporter. Surprised at his approach and air of anticipation, Craig stiffened.

Then he realized that Schmidt was looking past him, not at him. Craig followed his gaze and all but exclaimed aloud. Of all unexpected people, Harry Dennis, the man who ran Bay City, had just entered the inn from the street. In gray homburg and creamy polo coat, he was a massive and imposing figure.

He was returning the saturnine man's gaze with warning, with almost venomous interest. Craig looked back at Schmidt, saw him hesitate, saw his left arm half raised in that curious, indecisive gesture, saw him turn away and move toward the stairs.

Again Craig was aware of something familiar about the man who called himself Schmidt. The reporter had just about got it when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder, and a jovial politician's voice boomed in his ear. Harry Dennis had spotted him.

Craig's right hand was grasped, and he was swung around to face the Bay City boss. But not before he saw Mary Fennell, a look of blank panic on her pretty face, almost scurry across the lobby and dart up the stairs. He managed to exchange brief banalities with Dennis but was vastly relieved when the assistant manager came over to greet the new arrival.

"Come up to my room for a drink as soon as I'm settled, Craig," boomed the politician. "I'm interested in what you've been doing, mighty interested. We Bay City boys should stick together when we're out of town, even if we don't always do it at home."

"Glad to," said Craig and ducked. When Mrs. Ravenal had showed him the register that afternoon, he had managed to get a look at the number of Mary Fennell's room. Like his own ravaged cubicle it was on the second

floor, but at the other end of the building. He went there directly and rapped hard on the door.

"I know you're in there, Mary," he said when no answer came. "It's Allen Craig, and it's time you and I had a little talk."

"Oh—Allen," she said faintly. Apparently she had been just on the other side of the door. She opened it a crack, made sure he was alone, then stood aside to let him in. She locked the door quickly after him. Unquestionably she was a very frightened girl.

"Okay," he said. He sat on the window sill and lit them both cigarettes. "You planted those cuff links, didn't you?"

She nodded. "I don't suppose there's much use in denying it now." She shivered and added, "That poor woman—getting killed."

"Later," he told her. "All I want to know is why? You say you aren't acquainted with Harry Dennis—but you're afraid of him. I'd like to have a why on that one too, Mary—or is it Denise?"

She nodded again, and he wanted to hold her close and tell her it was all going to be fine. "I couldn't figure you for a newspaper gal," he told her. "I couldn't figure you at all. Nice girl—*nice* nice girl. Then my boss suggested that maybe Caleb Markham's daughter planted those cuff links. It made sense of a sort. You were only hanging onto my coattails for a purpose. That could have been it. What about it? Why, Denise?"

"Denny, please," she said in a small voice, all traces of irony gone. "It was on account of Dad, of course. After mother—killed herself, I found a diary. I was only nineteen and had no money of my own then and couldn't do a thing about it. But she killed herself because she thought Harry Dennis had killed my father."

"Holy smoke!" said Craig. "You mean that your father—that Caleb Markham—was not killed, if he was killed, for political reasons? That Harry Dennis killed him so he could marry your mother?"

"Something like that," said the girl. "I've been—pretty confused, of course. There didn't seem to be anything I could do. Then I happened to hear Harry talking to someone about your visiting him a few months ago. He said he'd like to have you working on the case."

"Why should he want me on it?" Craig mused, frowning. "It doesn't make sense!"

"It does," said the girl, and her voice trembled ever so slightly, "if Harry had reason to think my father was dead somewhere near Bay City. Having you scouting around on the wild-good-chase, out-of-town angles until he was declared officially dead was the perfect out for him under those conditions. Then he called somebody else and asked him to give you the assignment—a newspaperman from what I heard on the upstairs extension."

FREEMAN!" exclaimed Craig, for whom the pattern was beginning at last to make a little sense. "No wonder my expense account has been so liberal. Your stepfather must have been paying it. He probably set it up to look like a noble gesture. What a stunt!"

"He did," Denny Markham said evenly. "He made it sound wonderful. He's had reports on your progress, and I've managed to get a look at them. I had to do something to keep the plan from working. I couldn't let my father's murder go undiscovered—or unpunished.

"I had some money of my own. So I had the jeweler who had made the originals of those cuff links make copies for me. I figured any hint my father was still alive would open the case up again. By the time you were ready I was able to pick you up in St. Louis."

"You must think I'm an awful sap," he said bluntly.

She shook her head. "Don't be foolish, darling." There was a trace of her normal arrogance, and he liked it. But it faded almost at once. "I didn't have a chance to do anything until you came up here. I planted the cuff links this morning—I managed to borrow the key from the floor-maid—and then—" She buried her face in her hands a moment, then looked up fearfully. "What can we do now, Allen?"

"We're going to beard Harry," Craig told her. "He's already asked me to his room for a drink and— Holy Moses! That

man in the lobby, that Mr. Schmidt! He's the man I almost ran into coming out of the side door in Harry's garden wall in Bay City. He must be the connection. There isn't any other."

Craig picked up the telephone, got a call through to Manning Freeman. "You're going to be in the papers, honey, whether you want to or not," he told Denny, and she nodded miserably. When he got his publisher, he gave him a quick sketch of what he thought had happened. He described "Mr. Schmidt" in full detail— chevron smile, lift of left arm when startled, exquisite clothes.

"If I didn't know better," Freeman told him, "I'd say that was Grady Wolfe. But that's impossible. He and Dennis haven't been on speaking terms for years. . . . Yeah, Allen, this Wolfe is a sort of high-class floater. Always has plenty of dough, doesn't work, no family to speak of. But no mobster label. He and Dennis got in a row years ago when Wolfe ran for councilman against one of Dennis' hand-picked candidates. Won, too, but only once."

"I know who he is," said Craig. "Wonder what his spot is in all this? And what he was doing at Harry's house that night?"

"You say Harry himself is on the scene?" asked the *Gazette* publisher. "Why don't you ask him? It's your job. Incidentally, he's the lad who wanted you to take on this assignment."

"I've already gathered as much and I'm going to see him in about three minutes," said Craig and hung up. He got up and moved toward the recently soi-disant Mary Fennell, who was standing in front of the mirror, girding her lips for the coming encounter.

"Uh-uh!" he said. "Hold it." He put his hands on her slim shoulders, turned her toward him. "This may not be the time but before anything else happens I want to do this—I've wanted to since St. Louis."

"You mean that?" she asked him, and again there was no trace of mockery in her voice or manner. He nodded and they clung together for a brief, passionate moment. When it was over, she turned back toward the mirror. Her eyes were soft and unguarded for the first time in his too-short acquaintance with her.

"Listen, Mar—I mean, Denny," he told her tensely. "There's one other thing—I'm beginning to believe your father may not be dead, after all." He told her of Tom Shaw's strange behavior during the ride to the diggings and his unexplained return to town.

"He was here," said Denny Markham. "He seemed awfully worried about somebody he called Charley. He was in and out of the hotel two or three—" Her voice faded away, and her eyes got large. "Allen, you aren't kidding? You think there may be a—"

"I don't know," he replied thoughtfully, wishing he had kept his mouth shut. "Don't get your hopes up, honey. But Shaw certainly did act oddly when I told him about the cuff links."

"I wish I'd never had those miserable things made!" the girl said passionately. "But perhaps—if they bring Dad back to life—" She paused, added, "There was a funny old man here between Mr. Shaw's visits. He just came into the lobby and stared and went away. I think he was drunk. Maybe that was Mr. Shaw's Charley."

"Maybe," said Craig. Outside and below, they heard the sound of a car starting and being driven furiously down the street and, startled, listened for a moment. "Probably the local M.D.," said the reporter. "Come on, honey. Let's get this over with."

Harry Dennis' room was on the third floor, the largest suite in the inn. Craig and Denny walked up the stairs side by side, silently grateful for the narrowness outside her stepfather's door, the girl hesitated, an unspoken plea in her eyes. Craig hugged her briefly, then pushed the door open.

"Don't go in there!" he said, shoving the girl away. "Get Lieutenant Carver in a hurry. Your stepfather's been murdered!"

At that moment they heard the sound of another car being started and raced down the town's main street, following the first one.

Their glances locked for a flash and then, on common impulse, both of them raced for the stairwell and the lobby.

Chapter IV

CRAIG almost missed the turn-off through the gate to the diggings. He was alone, driving the late Mrs. Ravenal's trim convertible. The dark moon-tipped firs on both sides of the dirt road seemed endless. Around him, save for the sounds of the car, the night was held in a silvery cold and threated with mist. He shivered.

A sorely-flustered assistant manager had given him the tip that had brought him out here. Tom Shaw, he had said, had finally found his head digger and taken him back to the diggings. Seconds later "Mr. Schmidt" had raced downstairs and through the lobby and apparently taken after the two men.

He would, the bewildered young man said, take care of Denny Markham and see to getting Lieutenant Nels Carver on the scene. He had added, in an agitated voice, "Don't judge Mrs. Ravenal, Mr. Craig. She thought he ought to know his daughter was here. She didn't realize—"

Briefly Denny Markham had been in his arms, then, kissing him, hugging him, making him promise to be careful. "I don't want to lose you now, Allen. I wish you wouldn't go."

"I've got to, honey," he whispered, "and you know it."

He had taken off, without a thought in his head save the desire to be in on the finish of whatever was happening. He had not felt fear. The urge to conclude his long four-month assignment, his desire to be in on the finale of the Markham case, was too hot to leave room for fear. It was his job, and he was on his way.

Now, however, he was beginning to feel the first cold dash that follows sober thought. Unarmed, he was on his way to find a killer, perhaps to walk into a nest of them. With alarming rapidity he was getting nearer to the log cabin, and he had absolutely no plan of campaign.

There was nothing for it but to play them as they fell. He slowed as the cabin loomed up in front of him, a dark unlit oblong against the cold blue of the night sky. The road narrowed to a single track before widening into a parking circle. The reporter turned left, backed and blocked the roadway with the tan convertible, leaving no more than three feet of byway between its bumpers and the close-growing evergreens.

He left it in gear, stuffed the keys into his pocket, and proceeded toward the log house, walking on the grass that bordered the driving surface so he would make no sound. He saw the moon-washed outlines of Shaw's station wagon and of a huge Cadillac sport sedan that must belong to Grady Wolfe.

At first, there was no sound. He stood close to the cabin, his head cocked for the slightest noise. When it came, it was faint, a shrill keening that seemed a great way off. It took him precious seconds to identify it as a woman's moaning.

The door was open, and he stepped in cautiously, wishing he had a flashlight. Then he tripped against a table and stopped dead, sweating.

"Who is it? I shoot!" It was the apple-cheeked Hedda and she sounded as if she meant business. He wondered if she were the woman who had been moaning.

He said softly, "It's me, Hedda—Mr. Craig. I was here with Mr. Shaw this afternoon. Remember? Mike drove me to town."

"Then Mike is here—good!" Unmistakable relief was in her voice.

"Sorry, he isn't, Hedda. Where are the others?"

"My poor Charley!" she cried. "He is like one crazy. He run off to town when he get the phone call from Mrs. Ravenal this afternoon. Now, when Mr. Shaw bring him back, he is drunk. He stagger that way—" she pointed— "to where they dig up the old people. He is there now—and Mr. Shaw—and the man who come after him."

"You have a telephone?" he asked. He could make her out now as his eyes grew accustomed to the interior darkness. He saw that she was carrying a gun—a shotgun—in the crook of her left arm. He took it from her, and she made no resistance.

"Now listen to me," the reporter told her. "I want you to call the inn—you know

the number? . . . Good. Call the inn and if Lieutenant Carver is there, tell him to get out here in a hurry. If he isn't, tell the manager at the inn to tell him. Got it?"

She repeated his instructions dully, and he said. "When you get finished, you'd better get lost in the woods for a bit. Anything may happen. You say they went toward the diggings?"

"Ja, they are there," she said flatly. "You will help my poor Charley, Mister? You will be a good man?"

"I'll do my best, Hedda," he told her. "Now make that call and get lost until the lieutenant gets here. Don't forge—"

HIS words were interrupted by the unmistakable flat bark of a heavy automatic pistol somewhere beyond the cabin. It was followed by the crack of a low-calibre rifle. Hoping Hedda would get things straight, the reporter left the cabin by the front door, circled it to the path.

As he trotted through the redolent pines it seemed to him they were leaning in on him. What was it Hedda had said— "where they dig up the old people?" Somehow it had an eerie ring. He shivered and told himself that it was nonsense, that any Vikings who might have passed this way had long been dust beneath the pines.

The silence, save for the scuffling of his own feet on the path, continued. The path seemed much longer than it had when he had walked it in daylight with Mike Molinski. The reporter had to fight hard to keep blind terror from closing in on him. He had an overwhelming desire to get out of there.

Again the crack of gunfire sounded, this time so close that Craig jumped. It was the rifle, he decided. The pistol answered with its sharper splat, and he actually saw the flash that cut the darkness like a thin ribbon of blazing magnesium.

The reporter halted in the shadow of the last of the trees, trying to get some sort of orientation. The clearing that had once been an inlet of the lake, a shallow, furze-covered bowl, lay immediately before him, its far edge rimmed with pines. The mound—barrow, he supposed it was called—lay ahead and to his left. As he looked, the rifle flashed from the cut within it, and a bullet ricocheted from a stone somewhere in the depression.

The revolver answered twice, and Craig heard, for the first time since 1945, the ugly unmistakable sound of a low-velocity slug find its mark in human flesh. A low curse came from the darkness of the cut, a laugh from the hollow.

"Why don't you give up? You're down to size now and I've got a pocketful of clips," said a voice from the depression.

"I'm all right, Wolfe," It was Shaw's voice, and it bore no suggestion of pain. "Why don't *you* give up? You're cooked, anyway."

"Because I messed this job once I'm not going to mess it again," said Wolfe, his deep voice ragged with tension. "Because if I'm going out, I'm taking the rest of them with me."

"Götterdämmerung complex," said Shaw from the cut.

"Right," said Grady Wolfe, "if that's what I think it is."

Craig, wishing he had thought to ask Hedda for more shells, was inching his way, belly-flat, toward the murderer's flank. He had only two shells and he had to make them good. He wished the men would keep talking. But there was only silence, and he lay still, waiting.

Then he heard a snort, a rustle of underbrush, a quick intake of breath. They added up to one thing—Wolfe was getting ready to charge. The reporter got the gun up, fingers on both triggers. He held his breath, waiting for what had to come.

Without a word a dark form loomed up from the cover before Craig, looking huge from his worm's eye view, its upper body silhouetted against the night sky. Craig led him a little and then, knowing he was a gone gosling if anything went wrong, let both barrels go at once. With a gasp and a gurgle Grady Wolfe fell from view and only the parabola made by his lost pistol showed against the sky.

"For God's sake, is that Mike?" cried Shaw from the cut.

"It's me—Craig," the reporter told him. "I got the shotgun from Hedda. Who's

hurt up there—Charley?"

"Right," said the archeologist. "He'll live—now that you seem to have disposed of Wolfe. How about giving me a hand here?"

A bull's-eye lantern appeared in the midst of the cut, revealing the ghostly stone ruins of the Viking structures with the eerie vividness of a technicolor movie. Craig got over there and helped Shaw make Charley, a toil-bent, liquor-whipped figure, more comfortable. There was first-aid equipment handy, and Shaw had the patch-up technique his type of work demands on occasion.

WHEN they had finished, they went after Wolfe, who was a moaning unconscious mess, his entire left side from armpit to hip torn by buckshot. Shaw whistled through his teeth as he examined the injuries, shook his head.

"You really did a job on him," he said to Craig. "Well, perhaps it's the best thing all around."

"You mean he's going to die?" the reporter asked. "He killed Harry Dennis at the inn just about the time you left."

"I know," said Shaw and, at Craig's incredulous expression, nodded toward a telephone—an anachronism in that setting—in a corner of one of the 90-year-old ruins. "I called for help when I found the devil had trapped us. Carver ought to be here any minute now."

As he watched Shaw do what he could for Grady Wolfe, Craig wondered aloud what had driven the man to such a course of killing. The archeologist said, without looking up, "He had to. He was the man Harry picked out to take care of Caleb Markham. It was an odd subtle relationship between them, a typical bit of Harry's Machiavellianism. No one was supposed to know they were on speaking terms. Actually, Wolfe was Harry's ablest super-guerilla or what-have-you.

"Naturally he drew the Markham assignment, but he wasn't up to it. Markham was onto him—along with a lot of other things he wasn't supposed to know about Bay City—and got away. He was too disgusted with what he had learned before Wolfe tried to gun him—with the fact that his wife was betraying him with his supposed benefactor, that Harry Dennis was using him as a tool to wipe out opposition vice and crime, that Harry would have him killed like a cockroach for getting out of line.

"It broke him. All he wanted was to get away from the world. He's not the first to feel that way, you know." Shaw paused in his bandaging of the killer, whose throat was beginning to rattle, to say, "Only one thing puzzles me—how this mess tonight ever got started again. I thought everything was safely buried."

"I can make a guess as to that," the reporter replied. "It was my seeing Wolfe, here, come from Harry's house. Evidently there was some evidence that might mean exposure if their tie-up was once suspected. It has to be that way. And it scared them enough so that they wanted me out of town for a while. This job seemed the least likely to make trouble."

He went on to explain how Denny Markham had got into the case, frightening Wolfe—the one man who *knew* he had not killed her father—into joining the chase. "And that in turn brought Harry himself on the run. For the first time it occurred to him that Markham might not be dead. He had it out with Wolfe at the inn, and now Harry Dennis is dead." Craig shook his head and concluded: "And the ironic part of it is that I not only didn't recognize Wolfe but didn't know enough about the background of the case to make anything of it, if I had."

Shaw stood up and crossed to a crude barrel tap, beneath which he washed the blood from his hands. "Sometimes," he said, "fate has a way of making things work out as they should."

"You seem to know a great deal about Caleb Markham, Tom," said the reporter. "Why haven't you ever come forward?"

"Perhaps because I preferred not to," the archeologist said, wiping hands and wrists on a handful of cotton waste.

"Thomas Shaw," mused Craig. "That was the name taken by Lawrence of Arabia when he disappeared into the British Army, seeking the anonymity he needed to write *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom.* He, too, was an archeologist forced into a different career

he did not want, a man whose ultimate instinct was to flee life rather than—"

"Hold it, Allen," said the older man, smiling behind his white beard. "I knew you'd get around to that sooner or later. It's good reasoning as far as it goes. Unfortunately, my birth certificate reads Thomas Shaw, and I was born almost in the diametric center of Manhattan Island nine years before Markham saw daylight. Furthermore, I am willing to have my fingerprints taken."

The reporter, looking at Shaw, could read neither bluff nor insincerity in the archeologist's steady regard. No, the bearded man was undoubtedly telling the truth. Baffled, Craig turned away, and found himself looking down at Charley.

IT WAS the gnarled and sunken face of a broken man. The nose was broken, and there was a scar along one cheek. Wispy, unkempt gray hair thinly framed the ragged countenance. In those poor features, thrown into sharp and clear relief by the torchlight, there was something stirringly familiar.

This ruined specimen was a far cry from the fastidious, handsome and always well-groomed Caleb Markham but the likeness was there if one looked hard enough for it and knew what to look for. Craig's mind flashed back to the apple-cheeked Hedda. What was her last name?—McKay. She was Charley's wife. Charles McKay—Cabel Markham. He looked up from the gnarled chief digger, met understanding in the archeologist's kindly gaze.

"You're right," Shaw said. "You can see why you startled me so on our drive out here this afternoon." He added softly, "It's the way *he* wants things. He cracked, of course, years ago. I think he's been happy here—I hope so." Then, his voice hardening, he said, "I hope he continues to be happy here for many years to come."

"But what about Denny, his daughter?" the reporter asked.

"She needn't be lonely long," Shaw told him bluntly.

Craig felt his face grow hot. "What do you mean, Tom?"

"I'd say it was up to you," said the archeologist. "She's interested, maybe more than interested. She talked more than she realized at the inn this afternoon. I'm not going to tell you what to do, though." He peered past the younger man. "Hello—here's help. I can see lights coming this way through the trees. Understand, Craig—Markham's dead. He's been dead almost seven years."

"I understand," Craig told him.

Already he was outlining the story from the angle of a ghost who came out of nowhere to avenge his own killing. It might not be the literal truth, but it would be close enough. He had a hunch, too, that it would be remembered longer than the actuality.

Then, as he saw a slim small feminine figure revealed by one of the troopers' flashlights, he forgot about Freemen and the *Gazette* and the story. They could wait. Now he had other and far more important things on his mind.

Was it the no-good show girl who had left the door open—or was it the killer with his bloodstained key?

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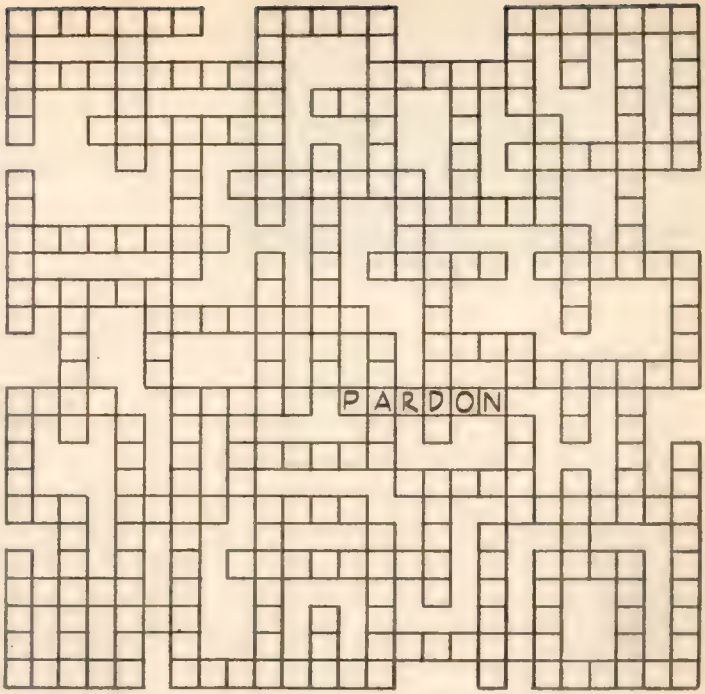
PUZZLE PAGE

Answers to puzzles appear on page 129

SKELETON PUZZLE

by A. F. Schroeder, Jr.

THE words given below all fit into this skeletal framework, like flesh on bones—if you can find the proper places for them. One word is already in place. As an added clue, to start you on this interesting bit of reconstruction, note that there is only one 11-letter word.



3-Letter Words
ICE
JUG
KEY
MUG
RAT
ROD

4-Letter Words
BARS
BULL
CELL
FINE
GAOL
GATS
HOLE
IDLE
LOOT
MEAL
PASS
RAID
SHOT
YARD

5-Letter Words
ARGOT
BLOCK
BRASS
BREAK
CAPER
CHAIR
CLINK
COURT
GUARD
LOCKS
RANGE
ROCKS
RULES
TRIAL

6-Letter Words
ARREST
BARBER
DEPUTY
HEATER
INSIDE
KEEPER
LAWYER
MATRON
NUMBER
PAPERS
PARDON
PAROLE
POLICE
RACKET
ROBBER
TRUSTY
WARDEN

7-Letter Words
BURGLAR
DUNGEON
FREEDOM
HEARING
HOT SEAT
OFFICER
OUTSIDE
SPONSOR
STRIPES
TEAR GAS
TURNKEY
YEGGMAN

8-Letter Words
ATTORNEY
CELLMATE
GANGSTER
SQUEALER
TOMMY GUN

9-Letter Words
BRACELETS
DORMITORY

10-Letter Words
INSPECTION
LIEUTENANT
QUARANTINE

11-Letter Words
CONFINEMENT

GOOD-BY CHIPS

Our little blonde friend has only five chips, yet she's managed to make two rows of three each. She also knows how, by simple rearranagement of the five chips, to make two rows, one containing three and one containing four chips. Can you do the same? Try it!

DETECTIVE MOVIE NEWS

This Woman Is Dangerous

The Las Vegas Story

The Sellout

Five Fingers

STRONG stuff for mystery fans is on your movie screens this season. Top stars in big-budget productions are coming from most of the studios bringing you the most exciting entertainment you could want.

Joan Crawford—by special request from her fans—returns to a life of screen crime in *This Woman Is Dangerous* for Warner Brothers. Here's one screen title that's explicit, appropriate and exact. Joan plays the master-mind of a ruthless holdup gang, and she leads her men to their biggest haul even while she faces approaching blindness.

The men in her life are Dennis Morgan and David Brian. Dennis, one of the few stars who can leap with ease from musical comedy to straight drama, plays the oculist who discovers plenty about his patient while staring into her eyes. David, who owes his first break to Joan for the part she chose him for in *Flamingo Road,* plays a similar role as her partner in crime and in love, a relentlessly jealous gangster.

Risky Business

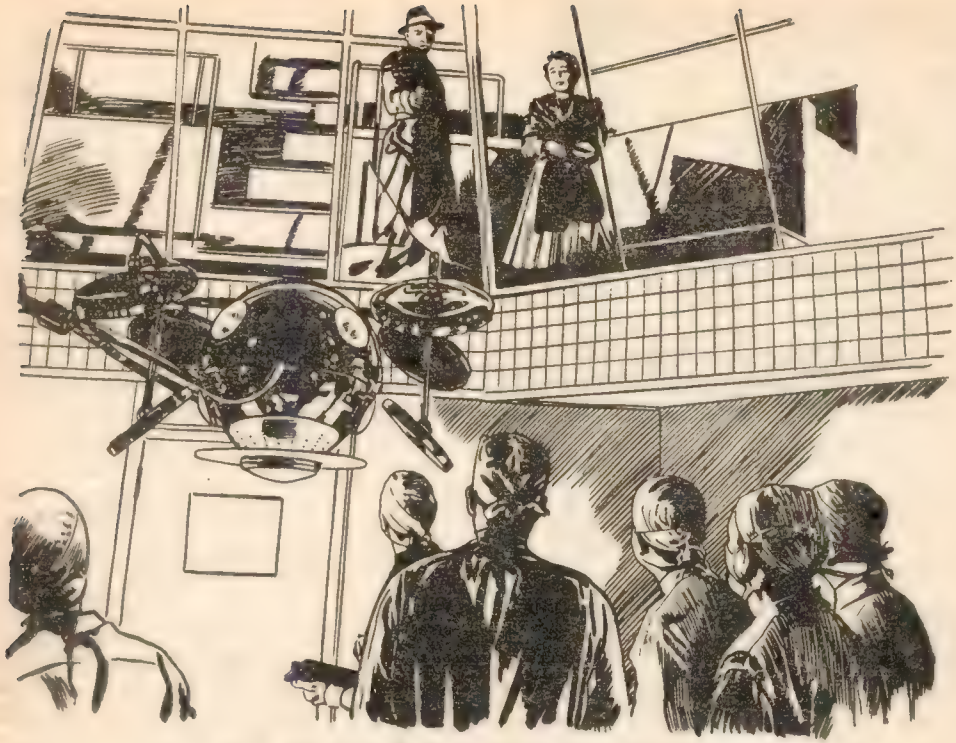
If you like your adventure violent, *This Woman Is Dangerous* will suit you fine. One of the most startling scenes ever photographed shows a man (we won't tell you which one) hurtling through the plate glass walls of an operating room.

The set was specially built for the movie, all paneled with real glass, instead of the safety glass usually used in studios, so that the camera could capture the jagged, shattering effect of its breaking. All set workers stood 25 feet back during these scenes, and even the camera was adjusted to run without the operator, who stepped out of danger along with the others—all but the actors.

Back to the Past

Another pretty dangerous gal is loose in RKO's *The Las Vegas Story,* though her specialty is perfectly legal—she steals men's hearts not their money. Jane Russell plays Linda Rollins, a woman with a past she left behind in the glamorous gambling town of Las Vegas. When she returns with her husband (Vincent Price), whom she married for money, that past catches up with her quickly. While her husband shoots dice with a feverish intensity surprising for a

John Hodiak and Audrey Totter in MGM's thriller "The Sellout"



David Brian holds a gun while Joan Crawford watches in this scene from Warner's "This Woman Is Dangerous"

rich man, Linda gets involved in a desperate gamble in which the stakes are love and life itself.

Linda soon learns she can't escape the life she once knew. She is drawn back to her old haunts, to men who remember her as a nightclub singer—to Happy, a piano bench philosopher (Hoagy Carmichael), and to Dave Andrews, the man she can't forget (Victor Mature). But while Linda recaptures the past, her husband is trapped in the present, chief suspect for a murder.

The *Las Vegas Story* reflects the glittering recklessness of the city where it was filmed, a city built on gambling, in a suspenseful story of Linda and Dave, playing a no-limit game.

From MGM, mystery fans are offered *The Sellout,* the dramatic story of hoodlums in police uniforms, holding a whole county in a grip of fear. Walter Pidgeon plays Haven Allridge, a crusading newspaper man, whose personal experience with a sheriff's gangster methods starts him writing strong, exposing editorials. But when the State Attorney General's Office sends Chick Johnson (John Hodiak) to get grounds for an indictment against the mob, Allridge's editorials mysteriously stop. He refuses to cooperate with Chick, even though he has been beaten up by the mob, and he plans to leave town.

Finally Chick, with the help of Cleo (Audrey Totter), begins to get evidence. He's afraid he hasn't enough to get a conviction against the sheriff and his henchmen, but he's determined to bring them to court anyway.

Afraid to Talk

At the trial, one witness after another lacks the courage to testify—even Allridge, though it tortures him to see injustice tri-

umph. At last, the man Allridge has been trying to protect decides to expose himself. He forces Allridge to tell the truth and breaks the case wide open. *The Sellout* is a real spine-tingler and an authentic story of today.

Anyone who likes mystery and suspense gets his money's worth in a spy story, so we recommend *Five Fingers,* produced by 20th Century-Fox, one of the best cloak-and-daggers Hollywood ever made.

We won't tell you much about the story, except that it's all true, the real-life adventures of one of the most fabulous spies in history, the highest paid and the most successful, though neither "Cicero" nor his Nazi bosses profited by his work in the end. There are only two men alive today who know his story. One is L. C. Moyzisch, an attache to the German Embassy in Ankara, Turkey, during the war, who wrote the book on which the movie is based. The other man is Cicero himself.

Made a Million

Cicero's whereabouts had been unknown until Fox started filming *Five Fingers* in Ankara, but he smelled profit when he heard that his life was being filmed and arranged meetings in true cloak-and-dagger style between members of the company and himself. Producer Otto Lang and Director Joseph L. Mankiewicz saw Cicero, but he gained nothing financially. No dealings were arranged with him, partly because the studio wanted none and partly because the Turkish government requested none.

Cicero, who was paid more than a million dollars for Allied secrets, is in real life not nearly so glamorous as James Mason, who plays him on the screen. Lang described him as a quiet individual, shabbily dressed, in his late forties, with bushy hair and quick observant eyes. Mankiewicz dismissed him with the comment that he looked like what he was—"a thief, born to be a thief."

He was, however, a very remarkable thief. He sold bombing plans, the minutes of the Teheran conference and even the schedule for the invasion of Europe to the Germans without being caught. When he reappeared in Ankara he poured out his troubles to Lang and Mankiewicz. He tried to go straight, he said, and that led to his downfall. If he'd stuck to the spy business he might be working for the Russians today, he announced mournfully. But, of course, you can't take Cicero's word for it that he isn't.

Anyway you can take our word for it that Cicero was working for the Germans during the war, and if you do you'll agree that fact can be as thrilling as fiction. The star-studded cast of *Five Fingers* includes, besides James Mason, Walter Hampden, Danielle Darrieux, Michael Rennie and Oscar Karlweis, all of them contributing fine performances to give you an exciting evening at the movies. —*Ann Kennedy*

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DANGER...MANIAC!

by David Alexander

The house seemed like safe shelter from the storm. . . .

IN THE little town that clung to the side of the steep, brooding mountain they told me that I should never try to drive up the Old Road. The weather station had reported that the blizzard was sweeping down the great mountain and that soon even the valley roads might be impassable.

But I felt it was urgent for me to cross over the great black mountain before the whole wild and craggy region became snow-locked, and the Old Road was the only way.

I began the dangerous ascent over the rough and rutted road, driving as slowly and carefully as I could. On one side of me was the sheer, black rock of the mountain, on the other only dizzying, blue-gray space. It grew colder and darker as the vehicle labored up the old, abandoned road.

It was perhaps an hour later when I saw the first white patches that marked the summer snow-line. Here, in this high place, the wind was a wild whistling, and there was no sign of life. Here was only the great, hazy emptiness of space. The Old Road twisted upward over the black rock and old snow like a scaly, sleepy serpent.

Now, all at once, the blizzard came screaming down upon me. I drove on for a way through the swirling, blinding whiteness of the storm, and the tires screeched and skid-

ded closer to the lip of emptiness.

Finally there was no more going forward, and I dared not try to turn around. The windshield was an icy screen, and when I lowered the window, the wind-whipped snow lashed furiously in my face and blinded me. I left the car and crept upward, and I knew mad dread of the awful emptiness so near me.

Darkness had descended before its time, but it was the white darkness of a snow-filled world. Often I stumbled and often, too, I fell and tore my flesh against the sharp juttings of the mountain wall.

Once I lay flat for a long while, breathing the cold snow-air that burned my throat and stung my lungs. The snow was burying me beneath a soft and deadly blanket and I knew that soon I would be stiff and frozen and that no one would find my corpse in this nightmare place until the mountain wild-flowers grew again.

Then I saw the light.

THE fretful wind gusted up from a new direction, scattering for an instant the mad dancers in the carmagnole of snow-flakes, and there was a dark tunnel in the whiteness and at the end of the tunnel there was a warm and glowing light. It seemed very near, and I struggled to my feet again.

With bloody fingers I clawed the rock and stumbled on, despair giving me strength. The white curtain again obscured the dark tunnel and the glowing light that marked its end.

Although it seemed near, there was long and desperate climbing before I saw the light again. This time, though, there could be no doubt, for the light was shining steadily through the cold, flickering curtain of the snow.

I tried to shout, but my voice was only a weird croaking, and so I lurched and stumbled on. The light came from a sturdy log house that reminded me of the chalets I had seen in Switzerland. I beat my bleeding fists against the bark-rough logs of the house's door and sobbed for succor.

The door at last flew open, and in the warm and welcome light stood a gigantic figure. At first I was frightened by the hugeness of the man and by the flaming redness of his curly beard and hair which shone ember-bright in the ruddy light. Then I saw the eyes beneath the bushy brows, and I ceased to fear him, for the eyes seemed kind and merry.

The giant who had opened the door clutched me by the shoulder and drew me out of the screaming wind into the cheery warmth. Then he slammed the door and shut the riotous storm outside. I sank into a chair, exhausted, hardly believing that I could have found a dancing fire in such a wilderness of rock and ice.

The house seemed to have been built for the man who occupied it, for everything was of generous proportions. The spacious room in which I sat, taking warmth into my frozen flesh, was high-ceiled and was dominated by a massive fieldstone fireplace in which great logs crackled and spurted flame.

On each side of the fireplace bookshelves mounted to the ceiling. A huge, rough-hewn table in the center of the room was piled with pewter plates and drinking mugs, strange African wood-carvings, and yet more books that had an old and esoteric look.

The chairs were strongly made of native wood, upholstered in some roughly patterned homespun stuff. Here and there on the floor were the skins of grizzly bear and mountain goats. A great-antlered elk's head glowered down from a wall above old guns and powder horns and hunting knives.

Logs were stacked beside the fireplace and beside the logs there stood an axe. But oddest of all the things in this warm, firelit room was a heavy wheel of stone that must be used for grinding and whetting the axe's cleaving blade.

Before he spoke, my burly host poured a draught of brandy from a crock of stone. It was as if I swallowed the glow of the fire-light itself and was warmed by it. Then the giant smiled through his curly beard and said:

"You are indeed an orphan of the storm, my friend. I have few guests at my eyrie here even in the summertime, but when the cold months come and the blizzards blow I never see a human being."

I gasped my thanks to him and he said,

How come you here, my friend? Few except myself ever venture the Old Road and its treacherous potholes even in the best of weather. It has been abandoned now for many years. Those who would go east or west take the great paved highway that curves for many miles around this range of hills."

"The journey was too long," I replied to him. "I had an urgent errand."

"I will heat water for you," said my host, "so that you may bathe, and we will dry your clothes here by the fire. My name is Sandstrom, by the way. Friends call me Sven." He took a copper oil lamp from a peg and went into the back of the spacious house of logs.

I undressed before the fire, hanging my soaked garments up to dry and I became conscious of soft music in the room. To my surprise there was a radio in a corner, and I knew it must operate on a battery, for there was no electricity in these wild, forgotten parts.

MY HOST returned to say my bath was waiting. When I returned to the high-ceilinged room, I found the giant rearranging my clothes before the blazing fire. My wallet fell open to the floor, and as he picked it up I saw him glance at the identification card.

"Frederick Paxton," he said. Then he repeated it questioningly and looked as if he should know the name.

"The name means nothing," I assured him. "I am just an unimportant man who had an urgent errand."

Shaking his head, he went to the radio and turned the dial. The music ceased. "The static is too much on days like this," he said, though I had noticed none.

He gave me clothes to cover my nakedness, and they were, of course, much too large for me. He laughed at the spectacle I afforded and said, "I'm a great hulk of a fellow and you are very small. About five-six, I'd say you are."

"Not much more," I told him.

"And not much more than 140 pounds, I'd guess."

"That's close to right," I said.

He laughed. "I have at least a foot and a hundred pounds on you, my friend," he said. "And I am strong. It is the axe, I think, that makes me strong. I keep it sharp and use it hard. Do you ever use the axe, my friend?"

"No," I said to him. "I've never had much need to chop wood."

He picked up the heavy axe and hefted it and looked fondly upon the keen, whetted blade. "An axe," he said, "has many uses if only you keep it sharp." He spun the stone wheel and placed the axe against it. Sparks flew from the blade. He tested the edge of the blade with his finger and repeated, "An axe has many uses."

We sat beside the fire, my host and I, while the great white storm raged in the darkness outside the sturdy wooden walls. We drank the fiery liquor from the crock of stone and talked.

I learned that Sven Sandstrom was a man of thought and a writer of deep things. He had, he said, explored the hidden places of the human mind, for he was a student of psychology and had been a professor at some ancient university. He had come at last to this mountaintop, this forgotten, windswept place, to think upon the things that he had found deep-buried in the human mind and to write of them. Some of the things he had found, he said, were as startlingly beautiful as the flora of the sea floor seen through clear blue water and some were hideous and foul and loathsome beyond description.

Sven Sandstrom's keen eyes regarded me appraisingly and he said, "I came here partly to flee temptation."

I pointed to the crock of stone and smiled at him. "It would seem," I said, "that you have brought temptation with you."

"The bottle," he replied, "is by no means the greatest of temptations. Don't you find it so yourself? Don't you find that when you are alone, when you are completely removed from the world of other men, your baser urges are lulled to sleep because there is no temptation to vent them?"

I did not understand what he was trying to tell me and I did not attempt to reply.

"Here," he continued softly, "here on this far mountaintop, I feel completely safe. And it is not just because no living soul is near

to tempt me. On wild and storm-tossed days like this I feel even more content, for the walls of my log house are strong. Outside I see the blizzard raging. I hear the blizzard roaring in my chimney. The world outside my door is cold and filled with snow, but here am I, warm and safe and comfortable. The firelight glows upon polished copper and old pewter and mellowed wood.

"I can choose, if I will, the best experiences, or the maddest ones, from the pages of the books upon my shelves, and cannot suffer from having lived them. My storeroom is hung with sides of venison, my larder is well filled and the ruddy wisdom of old wine is ready for the pouring. And to this place no man, saving yourself, of course, has come to tempt me."

The soft persuasion of his words, the firelight that stirred the shadows to a soundless dance, the good smell of woodsmoke, and the crackling of the logs that could be heard above the banshee shrieking of the storm made me, too, feel a sense of peace.

Then there came a disturbing thought: Today he is not alone; today *I* am with him.

The intricately carved wooden clock showed that the false night of the storm had at last become the true night, and through the snow-sheened windows there was an even deeper darkness.

SVEN SANDSTROM busied himself with the huge black pots that were suspended inside the stone fireplace, preparing a woodsman's hearty meal of venison and beans and roasted potatoes. As he worked, I began to glance through the books that were strewn upon the table. One calf-bound volume was an album. Inside were family pictures, stiffly posed, and beside each was a name, a date and an inscription in some strange language.

Sven Sandstrom regarded me curiously as I leafed through the album's pages. Then he crossed the room and stood behind me and asked, "Are you acquainted with the Scandinavian tongues?"

I told him that I was not. He pointed out a picture of a woman who wore a high-collared dress and a mobcap. She was a large woman with a strong face.

"My mother," he said. "The writing beside her name gives the date of her death together with the annotation: 'The moon was full that night.'"

He glanced out of the window into the snowy darkness and said, "My poor sister was insane, too, though not dangerously so. We had lived long beside a forest. A grim place it was. My sister thought much of death and tried to read the tokens of its coming in natural things—the moon, the stars, the sighing of the wind, the calls of animals."

He took one of the large pewter mugs from the tabletop and began to squeeze it between his great, hairy hands, pressing so hard that the muscles of his neck became distended. When he put down the mug, it was misshapen from the pressure of his strong fingers.

"Poor mother," he said. "She choked to death so many years ago. . . . Yes, as each member of our family died, my sister would write in the album—the date, together with some observation she had made of the heavens or the earth."

He pointed to the picture of a tall, heavy man. "My brother, Eric," he said. "My sister wrote on the night he died: 'The wolves were howling.'" Suddenly he lapsed alarmingly into a sort of blank verse. "Yes," he said, "it was a night when the moon glowed bloody and howling dogs went mad."

He set a log on end and picked up the axe. "My brother was a great woodsman," he said. "An expert with the axe. One night there was an accident."

He raised the axe and slashed it down and the bole split apart.

"My poor brother's skull was split apart as cleanly as this log."

At last he served our supper and we washed it down with bitter, snow-cooled ale.

Afterward he urged more of the brandy from the crock of stone upon me. "Drink," he said. "There is no way you can leave this place, and the night will be long. The brandy will help you to sleep untroubled by dreams."

But the food and drink failed to quiet me. I paced the room restlessly. Once I fumbled

with the dial of his battery set, but he called rudely. "Leave the radio alone. There is static on a night like this."

Often I pulled aside the curtain and peered out, wondering how long I must remain on this mountaintop with the fiery-bearded giant. He picked up the axe again and placed its edge against the wheel, and the sparks were like tiny, blue-gowned dancers cavorting on a floor of red-hot stone.

"You know," he said to me, "you are a very lucky fellow."

"Yes," I said, "if it were not for your hospitality I might well be frozen in a drift outside."

"Oh, that," he said, as if there were much worse fates than freezing. He glanced at the clock and said, "The night is wearing on. You knocked upon my door this afternoon. Yes, you are very lucky."

I could think of no reply. Sven Sandstrom tested the edge of his axe with his thumb. "Yes, you are lucky, Frederick Paxton," he continued. "You are warm and fed and so far safe. Yet you must know that there is a homicidal maniac within this room. You should pray, Frederick Paxton, for the night is very long."

He regarded me from beneath the shaggy, coppertinted brows and I knew that the light in his eyes was not a twinkling but a kind of madness. I glanced about me helplessly, and he chuckled.

"Those guns upon the wall are merely relics," he said, as if reading my thoughts. "They will not shoot, I fear. And I would not try for the knives, if I were you, for I am very quick and strong and expert with the axe, you know."

I LOOKED aghast upon the giant with the fiery beard. The giant who ground his axe.

"Come, Frederick Paxton," he said. "Come sit in the firelight with me."

I sank into the great wooden chair opposite him and took the brandy he proffered.

"Drink, Frederick Paxton," he said. "Drink and soon you will sleep. You are safe from the storm that screams outside these walls. It is only the screaming things inside us that we have to fear."

But I feared to sleep. The fire was no longer a friendly thing. Its flames were evil, obscene tongues that licked at the raw wounds the giant's axe had made in the severed trunks of trees. The crackling of the fire had become a horrid chuckling, more fearful than the shrieking of the storm.

"Yes," Sven Sandstrom was saying, "you may flee even unto a mountaintop and if you are one of those who lust for forbidden things, you will find temptation. Is it not true?"

I did not answer, and he asked, "What was this errand that brought you here in the face of snow and wind, Frederick Paxton?"

"I felt it was urgent for me to cross the mountain while I could," I said.

He chuckled. "But you have only reached the top," he said. "And there is no way down, you see."

I shuddered and asked, "How long does the blizzard last?"

"Sometimes for hours. Sometimes for days," he answered. "At any rate it is sure to last the night. And the night is long."

He mixed a concoction of brandy and spicy smelling things and heated it in the fire. "This is for you," he told me. "It will make you sleep. It will make you sleep through the long night. It will be better if you sleep, Frederick Paxton."

He handed me the fragrant cup. "Drink, Frederick Paxton," he commanded.

"No," I said. "I have no wish to sleep."

"Drink," he said again, picking up the axe and testing its blade. "You did not look through all the pictures in the album, did you? There is one of my father. Beside his death date my sister wrote, 'The night was wild and snowy.' Drink, Frederick Paxton. Deeply, now."

I thought of trying to dash the drugged and spicy contents of the cup into the fire, but his eyes with their twinkling madness never left me. So I drank, remembering the hemlock draught of ancient Greece.

"It is time for sleep now," said my host. "For deep and dreamless sleep. Come."

He took the copper oil lamp from the peg and led me down a long corridor. He still held the sharpened axe in one huge and

hairy hand.

He opened the door of a sleeping chamber and placed the copper lamp upon a shelf. "You should be comfortable here," he said. "The potion I have given you will bring you sleep." He still held the axe.

He took a large, old-fashioned key from the door and fitted it to the iron lock on the outside.

"Why are you taking the key?" I asked.

He smiled at me through his curly beard. "I think it will be best for both of us if I lock you in tonight, Frederick Paxton," he replied.

"But why?" I demanded.

"To keep you safe," he said. "The window in this room is but a niche, too small even for a man your size to crawl through. Perhaps you might have troubled dreams and seek to escape from them. I should not want you rushing out into the freezing storm, you know."

"No," I protested. "No—"

But he had shut the heavy door, and I could hear the iron key turning.

He has the key, I thought. He is my gaoler. He has the key and he is mad. He is mad and has an axe.

I sought about me for a weapon. There was a sturdy wooden chair and the copper lamp. That was all. I placed both within easy reach and stood looking at the door. But already the drug had made me heavy-lidded. I opened the wooden panel of the niche that served as window, and the freezing air revived me a little.

I walked about the small chamber, whipping my arms, trying to stay awake. Always my gaze stayed on the door as if it held some unholy fascination. Snow drifted through the window niche and the flame of the copper lamp shuddered in the wind and made shadow dervishes leap upon the ceiling. The room became frigid and I took a rough blanket from the bed and wrapped it about my shivering body. The night, as he had said, was long.

AT LAST I could resist the drug no longer. The cold had numbed me, too, and the sighing of the wind was a witch's lullaby. I dropped upon the bed, and the great, dark weight of sleep came down upon me.

Some dreadful nightmare shape lurched at me and I tore through the curtain of sleep, rending it with my screaming. The wick of the lamp burned low and the snow was falling softly now and the wind had died to a muted whimper. I stumbled to the window. The false dawn of the high place shone palely on the earth and made the snow-mounds pallid-grey, like the bellies of cold and swollen corpses.

I heard a voice outside the door. It was the voice of Sven Sandstrom, calling "Frederick Paxton! The night has not ended yet. What phantoms are disturbing you? Why do you scream? You must sleep, Frederick Paxton. It will be better if you sleep."

The fiery-bearded giant with the great axe still watched outside my door.

I fell upon the bed again and sobbed with impotence and rage, but I made no further sound. The hours passed on the rustling wings of terror.

At last the heavy door was opening, slowly, silently. So slow, and, oh, so silent.

I tensed myself, prepared to spring.

The giant Sandstrom stood before me, regarding me with his mad and mocking eyes. Still he clutched the axe.

He said, "So, Friend Frederick Paxton, the long night has passed. The snow has stopped and the sun is high again. But I fear your dreams were troubled despite my draught. What nightmare fancies made you scream?"

He crossed the room and examined the copper lamp. "You have burned the wick away," he said. "Why do you fear the darkness so?" The hand which held the axe moved ever so slightly. "Foul things are done in daylight, too."

He closed the window panel, and there was a hushed moment in the semidarkness while I held taut, expecting his mighty arm to swing the axe.

But he merely said, "It is very cold here. Go into the big room where there is a fire."

In the big room, he busied himself preparing breakfast. I stood by the window, looking at the sparkling snow. I could

barely trace the serpentine circlings of the Old Road through the great drifts. Several hundred yards from the house, there was a mound of snow in the middle of the road, and I knew it must be the car I had left there.

I knew that if I were ever to leave this place of madness, I must kill Sven Sandstrom and that the killing of the huge and watchful giant would be a hard thing indeed. His axe was resting against the fireplace stone, and I moved a foot or two toward it. His back was turned to me, but somehow he knew I had moved, for he said, "No, Frederick Paxton. Do not try to take the axe. You are not expert in its use and I can reach it much sooner than you."

We ate breakfast, and the food choked in my throat, though I felt the need of it in my futile weakness. Always he kept the axe close to his hand.

After we had eaten, he sat smoking a queerly wrought meerschaum pipe with a gargoyle's head for its bowl. He was silent, and it seemed his thoughts were dark ones. I went again to the window and looked out upon the road that wound its way between the drifts.

Suddenly my heart seemed to stop beating. Far away something was moving in the snow; something lived in that white vastness. I glanced covertly at Sven Sandstrom from time to time, but he smoked his queer pipe placidly.

Now I could see that the moving thing was an Army jeep with a snow plough attached to its front. It came on, spraying iridescent snow clouds in its wake, like a small ship breasting mighty waves.

At last it stopped outside the house, and three men dismounted. They carried guns and they approached the house with caution.

When they knocked on the door, I cast a glance at Sven Sandstrom. He grasped the axe and said, "None of your tricks, now, Frederick Paxton."

I did not heed him but raced to the door and threw it open. The three men surged in, guns drawn and ready. Two wore mackinaws and one had on a uniform of sorts. One of the men in mackinaws, a red-faced, grizzled fellow, said, "County sheriff. We're looking for—"

"This is him, all right," said the man who wore a uniform of sorts.

THE red-faced man glanced at Sven Sandstrom and then looked curiously at me. He asked, "Are you all right, sir?"

"Oh, yes," I answered. "He threatened me and locked me in a room all night, but he has done me no harm as yet." I nodded toward the giant. "You had best watch his axe, though."

The man in uniform said, "He is insane, you know."

Sven Sandstrom still stood there with the axe, saying nothing.

"Yes," I said. "I know."

"You'd best come quietly," said the sheriff.

The man in uniform advanced, saying, "Oh, he'll come quietly. But first we'd better put his coat on him." He put the straitjacket on the maniac and tightened the straps and said: "You'll come quietly, won't you—Freddie?"

Sven Sandstrom spoke for the first time.

"There's hot coffee," he said, "and brandy. You must warm yourselves before you go back down the mountain."

The man in a uniform of sorts, a guard from the insane asylum, said, "You could use some brandy yourself, sir, I'd think. Our Freddie's a bad boy at times, you know."

"We knew yesterday that he'd headed up the mountain," said the sheriff, "but we couldn't get through the storm, even with the jeep and plow. We thought he must be frozen until we came upon the car he stole. Then we figured he was here."

"Yes," said Sven Sandstrom. "I knew he must be the man you were seeking. Who but a crazed person would attempt to come up such a road on such a day? And I had just heard a newscaster describe Frederick Paxton, the homicidal maniac who had slain a guard and escaped from the State Insane Asylum in the valley."

I looked at Sven Sandstrom with a certain detached amusement. I was safe because the men who had come up the Old Road would let him do me no harm with

his terrible axe.

"You took a chance, sir, when you let him in," said the red-faced sheriff to the red-bearded giant.

"Not so great a chance," replied Sven Sandstrom. "I had my size. And my axe. And a smattering of psychology. It is my theory that the thing the crazed fear most is the awful urge within themselves. I effected a transference of this fear. I made him believe I was dangerously insane and had murdered many of my relatives. My sister had written little complimentary verses beside the pictures in an album and I translated them to sound sinister."

The men who had come up the Old Road had finished their coffee and brandy and were ready to leave.

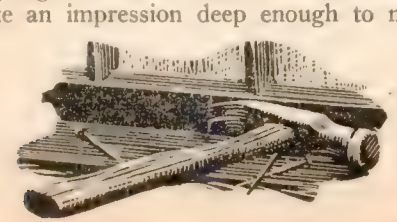
The man who wore a uniform of sorts took hold of my arm and said, in a friendly way, "Come on, Freddie-boy. We're going down the mountain."

He led me out of the warm and firelit house of logs into a world of wind and cold, a world in which a weird red sun spilled blood upon the snow. ● ● ●

THE SECRETS OF DETECTIVE WORK

SIMPLE TRICKS FOIL CROOKS

DETECTIVE work as dramatic as that of the mythical Dick Tracy and Sam Spade is performed all the time by real-life investigators. Take the Wisconsin Suicide Case that made the headlines not so very long ago. It concerned a widower who insisted that a pad of paper on which his wife's writing was imposed was a valid will. It was also, he insisted, her suicide note. "I can't find the original sheet," he claimed, "but anyone can plainly see the impression of her pencil on the pages that were underneath. Why, they extend down to the fifth sheet." It was that last little fact that not only prevented his claiming the cash but also put him behind bars as his wife's murderer. Special investigators proved, by inserting a pencil in the business end of a funnel, that the victim could not possibly have written the note. Lead shot was poured into the wide mouth of the funned, and the contraption was moved slowly over a sheet of paper with a string. This test accurately determined that three ounces was the limit of pressure that the woman could have exerted. But forty-eight ounces' worth was needed to make an impression deep enough to make an impression on the fifth sheet.



Another run of the mill case, and one that would make absorbing radio or comic-strip material, occurred in 1936 in the state of Pennsylvania. Here, a criminal had made bombs that had killed three persons. He would have gone on his lawbreaking and murderous way if an investigator hadn't remembered that every batch of 10,000 American-made nails bears a special identifying branding mark. Consequently, he figured that the nails found at the scene of the last explosion could be tracked down. It took a lot of work, but he finally succeeded in locating the manufacturer, the storekeeper, and eventually the purchaser. The latter was apprehended, sentenced, and put away.

By far the simplest, and most far reaching case of detective work took place way back in 1897. It required nothing more than a glass of ordinary water, in which a questionable silver certificate—which was common American paper currency at the time—had been soaked by an alert secret service man. He was correct in his suspicions because—presto!—the front separated from the back, since the glue which kept the counterfeit sheets together had been dissolved. Yet the money had looked so genuine, even to treasury experts, that the entire issue of bills, which bore the picture of President Monroe, had to be withdrawn. It amounted, in all, to $24,000,000!

—Carter Critz

"These three bills say I can do it"

IF THE SHOE DOESN'T FIT

A wise guy wagers he can steal a pickpocket's fedora and footwear

by RUFUS BAKALOR

"LLOYD'S OF LONDON" is a certain pinochle player of my acquaintance who is about as British as a cravat that glows in the dark. He comes by the name because he is willing to wager on practically anything. He will even bet that the world is flat, providing the odds are attractive.

Personally, I am not exceptionally fond of Lloyd's of London. To me, he is just a tinhorn bookie who can get very noisy at times, especially when he has been the heavy winner at pinochle.

Anyway, following our pinochle soiree last Monday night, the four of us—Lloyd's of London, Dook DuBois, Five-Percent Morris, and myself—were discussing certain topics of general interest when the subject of Willie Foote came up.

Perhaps you do not know Willie Foote by name, but chances are that the face would be familiar: a mousy little guy with a nose like a chin, who always wears a fuzzy tan fedora and a pair of suede-and-alligator shoes. Or, possibly, you have had business dealings with Willie Foote. By this, I mean that maybe he has picked your pocket or sold you some imported art photographs. He is a somewhat shady operator, as you may have gathered.

"This fellow Willie is a genius among dips," said Dook. "He could swipe the lenses out of your glasses and you would not notice it until somebody spit in your eye."

"I am just sitting here wondering," said Lloyd's of London. "And what I am wondering is as follows: Has anyone ever lifted anything *from* Willie Foote?"

"Not even the U.S. Collector of Internal Revenue," I said. "Willie is as cautious as a barefoot boy in a henhouse."

"No, it is not written that anyone should lift anything from Willie," said Five-Percent Morris. "It is strictly a one-way traffic proposition."

"Is that a fact?" asked Lloyd's of London. Can you show me where it is written that Lloyd's of London should not lift anything from this goniff Willie?"

"You would be wasting your time," said Dook. "It is an impossibility."

"An impossibility? We will see, gentlemen. I have three hundred fish that says it is not an impossibility. Whom wishes to cover? Speak up. Whom?"

"One little moment, if you please, Lloyd's," said Dook. "Just what do you contemplate to steal from Willie? His fedora?"

"Or, perhaps, his suede-and-alligator shoes?" I said.

"All right, gentlemen," said Lloyd's of

London, "that is exactly what I will do. I will bet these three bills that I will steal Willie Foote's fedora *and* shoes; and, furthermore, that I will arrive at this joint next Monday night wearing same."

"I am sitting here wondering if the shoes will fit you, Lloyd's," said Five-Percent Morris. "Concerning the hat, I have no doubts, for it will cover your head more than amply. But I have observed that Willie has rather small feet."

"Likewise, yours truly," said Lloyd's of London. "Anyways, to collect this bet, I will not complain if they are a trifle tight. For three hundred fish, one could purchase quite a wagonful of corn plasters."

Five-Percent Morris shook his head slowly, like a philosopher, and said, "To steal an ordinary man's hat and shoes is a tricky proposition. But to steal Willie Foote's will require some high-class strategy. This truly intrigues me."

"I have got a plan," said Lloyd's of London. "But the details of it I will not reveal."

"Will it be a legitimate theft?" asked Dook. "You will steal these articles and you will not buy them, for instance?"

"The bet is that I will steal them."

"Personally? Yourself?" asked Dook. "No hoods?"

"Personally. Myself. No hoods."

"Is it in your mind, perhaps, to break and enter?" asked Dook.

"No. I will steal them in his presence."

"You are contemplating a stick-up," I said. "You will employ gunplay?"

"No, I will not employ gunplay. I will use my wits."

"Well, if such is the case," said Five-Percent Morris, "then I will take a hundred of the wager. I would take it all; but I do not wish to appear greedy."

Dook DuBois and I took up the other two hundred; and hands were shaken heartily all around, Truman-style.

NEXT day, I happened to bump into Lloyd's of London, who was sporting a very becoming smirk. I placed a few small wagers on the gee-gees with him in order to get him into the proper frame of mind; and then I began to pump him about the Great Fedora and Footwear Robbery which he was to pull off.

"Lloyd's," I said. "I have thought and I have thought about this matter and I am baffled. I cannot for the life of me see how you can pull this stunt off. Maybe I am stupid; but if you will kindly satisfy my curiosity, I will be much obliged to you."

"Will it go in one ear and out of the other?"

"You can even pick the in-ear and the out-ear, Lloyd's. It would be like telling the Sphinx."

"Very well, then, I will give you a hint. I have studied this problem and I have come to a conclusion. This conclusion is as follows: there is only one way to manoeuvre Willie Foote into a position where I can steal his hat and shoes."

"You are referring to a drug of some kind?"

"No. Uh-uh. What I will use is a female accomplice."

"Oh-ho!" I said, and, frankly, that was all I could think of to say at the moment.

AS IT has all turned out, Lloyd's of London won the first part of his bet, but the second was a floperoo. It looks like he lifted Willie Foote's hat and shoes, all right. However, he did not show up Monday night wearing same, as contracted.

What happened was that last Monday the gendarmes took a notion to pick up a select group of bookies, among them Lloyd's of London. It so happened that he was wearing a tight-fitting pair of suede-and-alligator shoes. According to the local news items, the heels of same were hollow and, moreover, contained a very naughty quantity of morphine.

Consequently, we will be playing three-handed pinochle for approximately eighteen months. It's a pleasure. ● ● ●

For Other Crack Crime Yarns
★ TRIPLE DETECTIVE ★ 5 DETECTIVE NOVELS

A knife-wielding sex maniac was running loose, so Huey figured it would provide a perfect alibi if he killed Anita—like the madman!

ESCAPE OF DOOM

By R. VAN TAYLOR

ANITA had lied.

In the dark living room of her apartment, Huey Ragan knelt before a radio-console, his face numb with shock as his hands frantically explored the empty record compartment. It was no use—the twenty thousand wasn't there, and the realization of that made him both sorry and glad that he had killed her.

He replaced the records, then rose to his feet and just stood there for a moment, wringing his hands in desperation and wondering what to do next. He felt as if he were caught in a web, a delicate

web spun from Anita's golden hair against a background of hundred dollar bills dyed in crimson. It was a criss-crossing, double-crossing, terrifying web.

He was a slender man and no larger than the average woman. Neither was he handsome, but he had a weakness for things of beauty—things like Anita. The only trouble was, a man with his looks had to be very free with money to hold a lovely doll like her. That's why he had given her the money to keep—to impress her, to show her he was a big shot, to make up for what he lacked in looks and size. He had never dreamed she would try to pull the kind of deal she had. That's what money did to people—made them do strange things, just as it had made Huey plan the robbery. . . .

He had tried to figure a way out after he had first met Anita at the club where she sang. What he made as a bookie wasn't enough to keep her interested, and the fur coat and the few trinkets which he had fed her ran through his reserve in nothing flat. He had to have more cash. What could be done?

Then he had a stroke of luck in the form of timing. It happened that the whole town was being terrified by a maniac whom the papers called "The Mad Slasher." In the last two weeks this lunatic had slashed three women to death with a knife and left their mangled bodies as horrible, ugly warnings to all women who traveled alone at night. This man, who, like his next victim, was unknown, controlled the pulse of the city with fear.

And the police department was going crazy.

HUEY reasoned that it would be a perfect time to pull something on his own. With the police running around in circles trying to locate this madman and get the pressure off their necks, they wouldn't become very excited over just a common robbery. No, they wouldn't—not even if a touch of murder were involved.

So he set his plan in motion and it revolved around a bank messenger named Holiday. Holiday had a weakness for horses, combined with weak luck. In keeping with the plan, Huey let him get into him for a little over fifteen hundred, then he tightened down the screws and Holiday began to sweat.

After he had got the messenger good and scared, Huey went to him with a proposition. He wanted Holiday to tell him when he would be transporting cash, so they could stage a fake holdup. Holiday turned white at the suggestion, but after Huey explained how the underworld took care of welshers, Holiday would have bought any kind of a deal.

Now Holiday's body was on a cold slab in the morgue, his throat slashed from ear to ear, his brief case stripped of twenty G's in C notes. Huey really felt like a big shot when he gave Anita the money.

"Keep this for me a few days, baby," he said. "Soon we'll blow out of here and then—"

She let him kiss her for the first time. For this kind of stuff, he was ready to go out and pull another job.

But tonight, fate started spinning the weird web in which he was trapped. Earlier, Lieutenant Harrington and Sergeant Joe Tucker paid him a visit at his room. Joe searched the place while Harrington questioned him about the Holiday job. Somehow, Harrington had picked up a lead that Holiday was into him, but when Joe failed to find the twenty thousand dollar loot they left. But the heat was definitely on. Huey had figured on something like this, and it was another reason he had given the money to Anita.

He hurried over to the club and told Anita to get ready to move, fast. She acted a little strange, as if she weren't on the team at all, and Huey began wondering if she were going to try a fast one. She told him to wait outside while she changed clothes. He waited outside, all right—out in the back alley where he had parked his car in the shadows. He caught her as she was trying to slip out the back of the club.

He went crazy when he thought how he'd been sucked in by her beauty and come-ons. He knew that she was going

to try to beat it with the money. All he could think about was the hate which was swelling up in him, and another clever plan that was beginning to form in his mind.

He could kill her. He could kill her just like the Mad Slasher killed women and let the maniac take the blame for it. Yeah—it was perfect.

On a lonely side road in the park, he forced her to tell him where she had hidden the money. And then—

He'd never forget her scream when she saw the knife.

NERVOUSLY, now, Huey's eyes darted about the living room of Anita's apartment. He had to find that money. Time was growing short. It wouldn't be long until they discovered her body, for prowl cars were thick during this Mad Slasher scare. Maybe they already had found her. Maybe—

The fine hairs on Huey's neck suddenly stood erect. The high-pitched wail of a patrol car was coming closer. Then the siren slowed into inaudibility and tires screeched as a car pulled to a stop in front of the apartment building. Restlessly Huey's eyes switched about the room. This was it. And there wasn't time to escape.

He moved into the bedroom, pulled open a closet door and hid himself behind a row of dresses there. It was as hot and black as death. Sweat rolled down his neck. Perfume from the dresses filled his nostrils and tortured his mind.

He heard a key being shoved into a lock, and gruff voices filtered into the room. He recognized one of them. It was Harrington's.

"The way I've got it figured," he was saying, "is that the girl was keeping the money, so if we can find it here we've got Ragan sewed up, Joe."

"That's a good theory, Lieutenant," the man called Joe answered. "But she could have been another victim of the Mad Slasher. It follows the pattern of his crimes."

"Ragan's smart," Harrington said wearily. "But not quite as smart as he thinks. We'll suppose that he was the one who robbed and killed Holiday. Now, by keeping Ragan's character in mind, we should be able to get a picture of the whole deal. How would you say he'd get rid of the money, Joe?"

"There are a million places he could stash it."

"Right, but I don't think Ragan would do that. At this point he'd cease being smart and turn into a human being—and that's always fatal for a crook."

"What do you mean?"

Huey leaned closer to the door of the closet. One metal hanger tingled against another and his heart knocked against his ribs.

"Ragan is a shrimp," Harrington said. "He's the type of guy who wants to show off in order to make up for his physical shortcomings. Sure, he could have hidden the money and not told anyone about it, but I don't think so. He wouldn't have derived any satisfaction from that. It seems logical to me that he would have given the money to this girl he was trying to impress, or at least let her know about it."

"If he was making a play for her, why did he knock her off?"

"If he gave her the money, which I think he did, she might have tried to double-cross him, or, Ragan might have had some reason to believe that she was going to come to us. Either one of those reasons would be strong enough for him to want to get rid of her."

"That's all true, Lieutenant, but Anita could still be a victim of the Mad Slasher. When the boys locate Ragan he'll probably say that he didn't leave the club with her. He might even have a witness to support his story. If it works out that way, how are you going to crack it?"

"We won't have to pump it out of him once we find that money. If it's in this apartment, we've got him cold all the way around. Come on, let's search the joint."

HUEY cringed against the wall of the closet as he listened to Harrington and Joe moving about noisily.

Footsteps came into the bedroom. They

were the heavy, tired footsteps of Harrington. Huey pushed harder against the wall as they stopped by the closet door.

The latch turned and the door began to open.

Huey tensed.

"I've found it, Lieutenant!" Joe yelled from the kitchen at that moment.

Harrington thrust the door shut again and said, "Where, Joe?"

"In the refrigerator. Looks like you've had this deal pegged from the start."

"Ragan's our man all right," Harrington agreed. "They should have picked him up by now. Not much chance of him getting away. Every man on the force knows what he looks like. Come on, let's get out of here."

The detectives clicked off the lights and left. Huey grabbed a dress with both hands and swabbed his drenched face. They had him. There wasn't a chance in a million that he could get out of town. No use going back to the car which was parked on a sidestreet a few blocks away. It was just a matter of minutes before they'd locate it. But he had to do something—and fast.

He wiped his face with the dress again.

Dress!

Huey froze with thought. Why not? Why not dress up like a woman in Anita's clothes? Anita and he were about the same size. The clothes would fit. He could take his own duds, put them into an over-night bag and take them with him. Then he could get on a bus and leave. If he could pass for a woman, it would make for a slick getaway. Perfect.

Huey jerked the dress from the hanger and fought his way out of the closet.

Clumsily, in the darkness of the bedroom, he worked at it. He knew that his life depended upon the cleverness of the disguise and he tried not to overlook the slightest detail. He stuffed handkerchiefs into a brassiere, pulled on the dress, put on silk stockings, and crammed his feet into a pair of low-heel shoes. His hair was a problem, but he solved that by taking a scarf and wrapping it around his head and over his ears. Then he took his clothes and stuffed them into a small bag.

Make-up was another item. Going through the dresser he found a compact, lipstick, and small handbag. He could do the paint job after he got to some light.

Picking up the bag, he went into the front room. After taking a few uncertain steps he stopped and glanced at the window.

There was a chance that Harrington had stationed someone at the doorway of the building, and if he had, he would be stopped on his way out. There would be questions asked and the building superintendent would be called to identify him. No, he couldn't go out the front. He'd have to take his chance on the fire-escape.

He stepped through the window and slowly eased down the steel ladder, feeling for each step and keeping a firm grip on the over-night bag. When he came to the bottom, he dropped to the alley and crouched against the wall, moving warily toward the street. At the corner of the building he cautiously peered around at the entrance of the apartment house. The coast was clear. Briskly he darted onto the sidewalk and up the street.

He began putting distance between himself and the apartment building. Every few yards he would glance back over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't being followed. His shifting eyes sought out each obscure shadow, searching for a concealed person who might be watching his movements.

AFTER three blocks he began to slow down. He was breathing heavily and his legs had begun to tighten. Suddenly his head jerked to the right.

Something had moved in the shadows across the street. He was certain of it. For a brief moment he stopped, paralyzed, as he stared in that direction. His rapid pulse sounded like thunder in his ears. Then, swallowing hard, he picked up his fast gait again and cut around the next corner.

Still the feeling that he was being followed persisted. He broke into a run, but the dress clung to his legs and re-

tarded his speed. His breath grew shorter and shorter. Halfway up the block he threw himself against a building, gasping for air. He rolled his head around, looked back and scanned his route. He saw the dark figure of a man slowly moving up the street.

A chill crawled up his spine, hit his brain and exploded in terror.

Huey dropped the bag and ran. He heard the man behind him increase the tempo of his steps as he rounded a corner. Not far away there was dark gap between buildings. He sped toward it.

He cursed himself for ever breaking into a run in the first place. It was a dead giveaway. The guy was one of Harrington's men—there wasn't any doubt about that.

He cut into the alley, stopped and peered back. His pursuer was closing in fast. Whirling around, he started down the alley, then came face to face with a brick wall. The alley was a dead end!

Feverishly he sought an avenue of escape. There was none. The dark figure of the man moved into the mouth of the opening. Huey crouched against the wall, trying to think.

The man was large and stooped and moved with a shuffle. Huey knew it was just a matter of seconds before a flashlight would be spotted against him and a booming voice would call out for him to surrender. The cops were smarter than he had thought. Even though his disguise as a woman was perfect, he had failed to fool them.

But the light didn't come. Nor the voice.

Huey frowned.

There was a metallic click. A highlight flickered across cold steel. The man came on at a steady pace, clutching a knife in his hand.

This man wasn't a policeman! This man really thought he was a woman! This was the—

Huey screamed.

It was a shrill, womanlike scream. . . .

HOME WAS NEVER LIKE THIS

CONVICTS in England, when Charles II was king, certainly led an entirely different kind of life from what they do today, in the United States—that is, if they were detained at Newgate Prison. A man wasn't held there for punishment. He was merely held—period.

In fact, all the doors inside the prison gates were cheerfully unlocked between 8 A.M. and 9 P.M., leaving the inmates free to go wherever they pleased. Frequently this meant the popular Tap Room, where a complete variety of intoxicating drinks could be purchased. In addition, all the customers were furnished with facilities for gambling and certainly used them. What's more, any "con" could throw a big, lavish party for his friends on the outside.

Anyone could come, and usually did, including folk of high rank, who were attracted to the institution. This kind of thing wasn't the least bit unusual, since hundreds of visitors were admitted every day. The quiet and peaceable prisoner, who wasn't much interested in riotous living, wasn't left out of the picture at all. Not only could his wife visit him whenever he pleased, but she could stay for the day, overnight, or for years if he wished. His youngsters were permitted to come along also and frequently spent their whole childhood at Newgate.

By Manly E. David

"George," she said, nervously, "one of our neighbors has been murdered. Why is it that you act so completely disinterested?"

by WILLIAM DEGENHARD

WHO'S IN THE DARK?

BY TEN-THIRTY, the news had penetrated even into the small suburban movie house. Ed Manley, the owner of the garage near the station, had been murdered, shot by a burglar he had caught in the act of robbing his house. Some of the women grew so nervous they couldn't stay for the rest of the picture.

George was quite willing when Cora whispered that she, too, wanted to go. He was dog tired and he had let Cora talk him into coming only because he knew that if they had stayed home he would have let on to her just how bad a jam his business was in. It was times like this he wished he had not gone into contracting for himself but had

The kid was full of dope, primed to kill

stayed a boss painter.

The lobby outside buzzed with excitement. Cora, of course, had to linger and get the details of what had happened. George had known Ed Manley from having patronized the garage and he felt sorry about the murder, but somehow he couldn't work up much interest in something that didn't really concern him. With a show of politeness he listened to his neighbors—the Babcocks from across the street, the Walshes from the next block, and another couple he only vaguely remembered—exchange bits of information they had picked up. Misinformation, probably.

"The worst part of this," Sam Babcock said in a taut voice, "is that the police think it was someone from the neighborhood. All of us come under suspicion. They say Ed was killed sometime between six and eight. Most of us were home at that time, and our wives can alibi us. But a wife's unsupported word won't carry much weight in court."

George thought Sam was being ridiculous, but he didn't say anything. He was thinking that the man's tongue could get somebody into trouble. Sam had never learned to mind his own business. Pleading weariness, George got Cora away from the group.

Cora said goodnight and came along reluctantly, a bit annoyed at having been dragged away.

"I'm sorry, Cora," he said, "but I'm really tired and I have a big day tomorrow."

"Yes, I understand." Her hand gripped his arm hard. "George, did you lock the back door before we left?"

He thought back, trying to remember. "I think so. Anyway, we wouldn't have much to lose."

She frowned at him, then smiled slightly. Her hand trembled a bit on his arm. "It's awful, isn't it? They say the burglar got two thousand dollars in cash."

George nodded. "Ed was a fool to keep that kind of money around the house. I told him once he ought to put his day's receipts in the night depository, but he thought that was too much trouble." He shrugged. "Anyway, it's none of our business."

She gave him a quick glance but said nothing.

AWAY from the small shopping center that clustered around the station the streets were quiet, almost deserted. Thoughts of the murder quickly faded as his business troubles crowded back into his mind. Why couldn't that Harmon hotel chain have gone bankrupt *after* they had paid their painting bill? Coming now, he was caught so short he didn't even have money enough to meet his payroll. It was going to be grim, trying to raise that cash.

He was startled at how short those five blocks seemed tonight. Cora disengaged her hand and went ahead to open the door with her own key. She certainly was anxious to get into the house. George noticed that neither the Wilsons nor the Klingsmans, their neighbors on either side, were at home. Or maybe they were in bed, like sensible people. Too bad about Ed, but it was nothing for George to lose sleep over.

Once the front door was open, Cora fairly flew in and ran to the kitchen without even putting the lights on. George closed the door, sighed, went into the living room and switched on the floor lamp. He took his cigarette and lighter from his jacket pocket, put them on the table, then peeled off his coat and threw it in the easy chair. Cora was very nervous. He could hear her fumbling with the key in the back door lock. Women. They get excited about such foolish things sometimes.

"George!"

He wheeled, scowling as he realized how she had startled him. Cora appeared in the kitchen doorway. She was white.

"George, come here. Please."

Despite himself, he could feel excitement stirring inside of him. The back door was open and Cora was standing back from it, staring at the lock as if it were a crouching beast. His eyes narrowed, and he felt a faint crawling sensation going up his arms. There was a small yet clearly defined groove in the wood, as if a sharp instrument had been pushed in and forced back. There were scratches on the paint around the lock, too.

He gave her a quick look. "Was it open?"

"No." She pivoted. "We'd better see if

anything was taken.

She ran out, and he could hear her racing up the stairs. He poked around indifferently. There were no signs anyone had entered. It wasn't worth worrying about, anyway. They didn't have much of value around the house, no cash, no jewelry, nothing that could be turned into quick money. If they had, he might be able to get out of that business jam he was in without crawling to anyone for credit or a loan.

Finally, Cora came down. "My fur coat's there, all right. I can't see that anything was touched." She paused on the last step. "We'd better call the police, anyway."

He straightened abruptly. "No!" He felt flustered as he realized how loud the word had come out. "Nothing was touched. Why should we bother?"

Her eyes widened with surprise. "Because it's our duty. I read once in a magazine the police can tell from the marks what kind of a jimmy was used. This may help them."

George snorted slightly, picked up a cigarette and his lighter. "You'd better stick to your women's magazines."

She stared at him a moment. "George, what's wrong? I know you don't believe in—in minding what you call 'other people's business,' but this is—this is murder. Ed Manley was murdered tonight."

George lit his cigarette, put his lighter down. "All right, I'll tell you what's wrong. I didn't want to worry you, but it looks as if my business is going smash. I've got to raise two thousand dollars by tomorrow night to meet my payroll. If we call the police, what happens? It's after eleven now. They'll come and keep me up half the night, asking fool questions. Maybe they'll make me go down to the station house tomorrow and lose a half a day. I just can't afford it, that's all."

She bit her lip. "You may be wrong about the amount of time you may lose. You don't know how the police work."

"I *don't*!" He smashed his cigarette into the tray. "Remember what happened to Fred Gans? He found a gun on the train. What did he do with it? Like a good, upright, civic-minded citizen he took it straight to the police. Did they thank him? Sure, by throwing him into jail for illegal possession of firearms."

"They apologized."

"That was a great help, wasn't it?" he said sarcastically. "Did they pay him for the time he lost—and the embarrassment?" He picked up his coat. "I'm going to bed, Cora. I'm dead tired and I have a big day tomorrow. Let the police mind their business and I'll mind mine."

SHE moved away from the staircase to let him go by. "You may get in trouble, George. Did you think of that? If it comes out that the burglar was here and we didn't call the police, it's going to look very peculiar. People will talk."

"Let them," he snapped.

Cora was getting angry, too. "You forgot your lighter, George. I won't run down for it in the morning."

"I've got matches," he growled. "Leave it there for the burglar."

He was seething inside. That was just like a woman, trying to strike back in a petty, meaningless way because she didn't get her way. He swore inwardly. There were about two thousand houses in this suburban development, row after row of them, almost identical. Why did that idiotic burglar have to pick on his?

George was in bed by the time Cora came upstairs. He pretended to be asleep. He felt a bit ashamed that he had gotten angry, but he did wish she would be more reasonable and had a sense of importance. It was too bad about Ed, but, as far as he was concerned, his own troubles were more immediate and more urgent.

The light went out, and she crawled in, the bed creaking a little. The house became very quiet, but sleep would not come. Names swirled back and forth, names of business friends who might be able to help him. He tossed and turned. Gradually, his thoughts began to blur. Two thousand dollars . . . two thousand . . . The amount that had been stolen from Ed Manley, the exact amount he needed. Funny coincidence. But it was none of his business.

"George!"

The sharp whisper snapped him wide awake. He lay there a moment, gritting his teeth. Perhaps if he pretended he were asleep—

"George!" She shook him. "George, I—I heard something. . . . The—the burglar—"

He groaned once, then lay quietly, listening intently. He heard nothing but a drip, drip, drip, reminding him he hadn't fixed that bathroom faucet yet.

"George, don't say it's my imagination." Her voice was low, strained. "I—I really heard something downstairs."

He listened again, trying to locate the sound that was scaring her. He knew her. The time a field mouse had got into the house he hadn't got a minute's peace until it was trapped. It had never seemed reasonable to him that one small mouse could throw a grown-up woman into such a panic, but—

He stiffened, wondering what had startled him. He could hear the beating of his own heart. Then, he heard a sharp clicking that lasted only a few seconds, as if someone wearing leather heels had walked over a bare part of the floor. A cold lump formed in the pit of his stomach. He could swear—yes, he was sure—someone was moving around in the parlor downstairs.

He reached over, took his wife's arm gently, put his mouth close to her ear. "Don't get up. Don't make a sound."

Carefully, he eased himself out of bed, praying the springs wouldn't squeak. They didn't. He stood at the side of the bed, shaking a little inside. Not that he was afraid. He'd been through worse than this in the war. He looked around quickly for a weapon. Just enough light was seeping in from the street to make everything look slightly distorted.

He picked up the long, thin flower vase from the bureau. He had always wondered what Aunt Helen's pathetic wedding gift would be good for. With its weighted bottom it made an excellent club.

Cautiously, step by step, he went out into the hall. The drip, drip of the bathroom faucet suddenly sounded like the muffled beat of a high-pitched kettledrum. His heart pounded in time to it.

At the head of the stairs, he paused. He hoped desperately that the sound of his breathing wouldn't give him away. He went down, one step at a time, trying to keep firmly in mind that the next to the last step creaked badly.

A SCRAPING sound made him freeze. An icy sensation crawled up his legs as he realized that half his body would be visible from below by now. He bent over, holding onto the bannister and teetering a little. His heart seemed to stop and his breath caught in his throat. Over by the radio, he made out a vague figure—a man.

For a long, endless moment, the two stared at each other in the dimness. George's mind was racing. He knew the burglar was as scared as he was, maybe more. He couldn't see if the man was armed but he dared not back off. He knew the man might fire from sheer nervousness and that he could be hit in the lower part of the body. He had only one chance—and he took it.

He yelled piercingly as he jumped down the stairs and swung toward the burglar. The man wheeled, started for the back door, turned back as if confused. Something glittered in his hand. George yelled again and leaped desperately, swinging the vase as hard as he could.

The vase landed, but it was only a glancing blow. The man struck out, hit George's shoulder and knocked him backward, off balance. He pivoted again, stumbled over something, raced for the back door. George swore and went after him, rage sweeping through him. He heard footsteps pounding across the back porch.

Then—silence.

He raced out, stood at the edge of the porch a moment, looking into the blackness of the back yard. He could see nothing; the burglar was gone.

He shivered and becoming aware that he was lightly clad and in bare feet, went back inside.

"George!" Cora's voice was low, almost a moan. "George, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm all right."

He closed the kitchen door and switched on the lamp in the parlor. Cora had come

down, wide-eyed, white-faced. She hadn't remembered her own robe, but she had his. He looked around quickly.

Nothing seemed to have been touched, except the hassock, which the man had evidently stumbled over.

"I guess nothing's been taken," he said finally.

Cora's lips moved for a moment before she could speak. "George, you've got to call the police."

Irritation flooded through him. "Look, I'm tired. Nothing's been taken. I've got a big day tom—" He caught himself as he noticed how stiff-faced his wife was. He knew she would give him no peace if he refused this time. "All ri ht," he grumbled and headed for the phone.

He yanked the receiver off the hook, poked his finger into the hole to dial the operator. Anger and irritation drained out of him as he held the phone away to look at it and then put it to his ear again. There was no dial tone.

The phone was dead.

"The wire's been cut," Cora said in a low voice. "Look—over there by the phone box."

He dropped the phone into place, stared at the end of wire lying loose on the floor.

"We could leave it until morn—"

"George!"

Her tone was quiet, deadly quiet. He felt a flush mounting into his cheeks. Waves of fatigue were ebbing and flowing through him, but he knew he dared not refuse her. Not after this.

"I'll get dressed," he said gruffly.

She followed him upstairs. They dressed in silence. With a slight shock, he saw that it was almost one o'clock. He'd been tossing and turning almost two hours. He wouldn't be getting much sleep tonight, that was sure. Bitterly, he wondered why that stupid burglar had to pick out his house to break into, not just once, but twice in the same evening. He hoped one of his near neighbors was still up. Otherwise he might have to walk all the way down to the station to call the police.

Cora swung around suddenly. "Did you hear that?"

HIS head came up. The sound came from far up on Elm Road. A police siren.

"Probably chasing back to the station house."

"No. It's coming closer."

He went to the window, looked out, wondering what he expected to see. A light flashed on in the house across the street—Sam Babcock's house. The upstairs window went up and Flo poked her head out. A moment later, Sam came hurrying out the front door. He was only half dressed.

George pulled up his window. "Sam!"

Sam yelled excitedly, "They got the burglar! Shot him. In the lot across from Ollie Grayson's house. Ollie called me a minute ago."

He ran on, and George stood there a moment longer, scowling, wondering why Sam was going down there. Probably just nosy. That man never could mind his own business.

George closed the window. "They got the burglar." He turned and saw that Cora was dressed. "You don't have to go out now. It's no use both of us—"

He broke off as she walked out without saying anything. He shrugged, picked up his coat, and followed. The way she acted, it was almost as if she thought he would try to argue her out of calling the police about the burglar who'd just been here. Fat chance of trying to talk sense to a woman like her.

The street was deserted, except for one or two people who were hurrying down toward Elm Road. Luckily, Ollie Grayson's house wasn't far, only a block and a half down. Two police cars had arrived and both were shining their spotlights into the empty lot across from Ollie's house.

Almost everyone in the block was up, and a small group was gathered under the street lamp. George felt a bit uneasy, uncomfortable. There must be something wrong with him. He just wasn't like other people. If it were up to him, he'd be home and in bed. He felt tired, so terribly tired. And tomorrow—

He could see a policeman in the middle of the group under the street lamp. Sam Babcock turned as they joined the group and

looked a bit surprised to see them.

"What happened?" Cora asked quickly.

"The burglar," Sam said in clipped tones. "Ollie heard the shot and looked out the window. He called the police right away. He's dead—the burglar, I mean."

"We—" Cora began.

"Let me handle this, Cora," George broke in. "Let me through, please. I want to talk to the policeman."

Cora hesitated, then joined the women who were gathered around Sue, Ollie's wife. He knew now he was in it and he couldn't shrug this off.

The burglar was dead over there in the lot. One of them. George felt that there must have been two and that the other was a vicious killer. No one in the neighborhood could feel safe until he was caught, least of all George himself, for the burglars had come twice to his house, twice in the same evening. There must have been a reason why they had taken such a grave risk, a reason that George couldn't fathom.

Ollie, fat and perspiring a bit, showed surprise when he saw George come through the crowd. "Hello, George. What brings you out? Don't tell me you're just curious." He laughed and said to the cop with gentle sarcasm, "This is George Stevens. We ride into town together every morning on the eight-ten. He's the most uncurious person I know."

George ignored him. "That man over there—he may be the same one who broke into my house about fifteen or twenty minutes ago. He got away."

The cop scowled at him. "You sure took your time letting anybody know, didn't you?" He turned. "Dan." A plainclothesman passed through the glare of the spotlight as he came over to them. "This is Detective Rourke," the cop introduced. "Better tell your story to him."

GEORGE felt a bit damp under his armpits as he told the detective what had happened at his house a few minutes before. Rourke was a slim, thin-faced man with small, restless eyes. He didn't say anything until George was finished. Then he asked, "You saw only one of them?"

"Just one."

"Think you can identify him?"

"I doubt it. It was dark and—"

"Take a look, anyway."

Rourke led the way across to the lot. George could hear the buzzing behind him and knew they were talking about him. He was vaguely angry, but he told himself he didn't really care what they were saying.

The man was lying face up a short distance in from the sidewalk. Two burly cops and another plainclothesman moved aside when Rourke and George appeared and played their flashlights on the body. It was a young man, round-faced, with his mouth open and twisted into a grotesque grin and his eyes wide and staring. For a moment there was silence as the policeman waited until George had had a good look.

"I couldn't swear that was the man in my house," he said finally. "The man I fought was about his build, though. I don't think he's from the neighborhood." He added, "I've never seen him before."

Rourke turned to the other detective. "Find anything on him?"

"Nothing that gives his name," the other replied. "From the look of the dirt under his nails, I'd say he was a laborer of some kind—maybe a house painter or something like that. We'll get the lab men to tell us definitely. This is all I found in his pockets."

He opened his palm and showed a fifty-cent piece and a cigarette lighter. George recognized the lighter at once.

"That's mine," he said quickly. "I left it on the end table by the radio. Cora will remember that. He must have picked it up just before I got downstairs."

Rourke was looking at him thoughtfully. "Did you know Manley?"

George nodded slowly. "Just from patronizing his garage, that's all."

Rourke turned so that the spotlight from the police cars shone on his notebook and wrote something down. George watched, unaccountably scared and wondering why he should be.

"Mind if I go home now?" he blurted. "I—well, I'm very tired and I have a big day tomorrow."

Rourke glanced at him thoughtfully again.

"All right. We'll want a complete statement later. Just routine. Can you drop around to the station house tomorrow morning before you go to work?"

George said he could. He mumbled his thanks and went back across the street. Halfway over, he stopped, half turned. It flashed on him that he had completely forgotten to mention those marks on the back door, the evidence of the burglars' first visit. But, somehow, he just couldn't go back. He wanted to get out of here and go home.

A cold fear was creeping through him like a deadly, numbing drug. He was being entangled in a web of circumstance, a web not of his own making. That lighter in the dead man's pocket—The dead man might turn out to be a house painter, a man George might know. Ed Manley had been robbed of two thousand dollars, almost the exact amount George needed to meet his payroll. The police would surely learn soon what a jam his business was in. He remembered that Sam Babcock and one or two other neighbors had been present at the garage the time he had told Ed Manley he ought to use the night depository instead of keeping cash in his house.

His neighbors crowded around him, expecting him to tell them what had gone on in the lot across the street. But he didn't feel like talking. He wanted to get home, sit down, think. He called to Cora, a bit too sharply. That made him appear nervous and upset before all these people. Cora left the women she was talking to and came along without protest.

He was burning to talk to her but waited until they were well out of earshot of the others. Then, he asked, "Cora, did you tell anybody about that attempt to break into the house, those marks on the back door?"

Cora's brows went up. "Of course. You told the police yourself, didn't you?"

HE DIDN'T answer. A cold fist seemed to be closing around his stomach. That could do it, could snap shut the trap of circumstantial evidence, make him look as if, because he had failed to mention it, he were an accomplice of the burglars.

All the links in the chain were not unbreakable, but if the police were lazy or careless or were determined to make an arrest to satisfy the demands of the people in the neighborhood, they might seize on him. He couldn't deny it, even to himself. He was scared, badly scared. He could see himself being charged with murder.

Getting back into the house again was a vast relief. He felt as if a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders. He heard Cora lock the door as he walked slowly around the living room, trying to sort out his jumbled thoughts. He kept trying to convince himself that he was imagining things, that the police couldn't possibly suspect him of murder. Yet it was possible. He had to think.

"Are the police coming later?" Cora asked suddenly.

George turned, startled, quickly decided he mustn't let Cora know what he was thinking and get her to worrying, too.

"They may. I'll wait up a little while. You can go to bed if you want to."

She stared at him a moment, then put her coat on a chair. "I think we both need a good cup of coffee."

George watched numbly as she went into the kitchen. Usually he didn't take coffee so late at night, but this time he'd welcome some.

He sank down on the edge of the easy chair, stared at the overturned hassock. There was something queer about this, something very queer. He should have tried to figure it out long ago and not kept saying it was none of his business. Angrily, he brushed the thought out of his mind, tried to concentrate.

The burglar—or burglars—had tried to find something in his house. Why had they abandoned the attempt? Had they been scared off? Why had that boy in the lot been killed?

He scrapped this line of thought and started over. First, Ed Manley had been murdered. That had happened sometime between six and eight. Second, someone had entered this house. Assume that the same burglar who had killed Manley had come here. It seemed foolish, almost stupid, for a

burglar who had just robbed and killed to rob a second time in the same neighborhood within a few hours.

Yet George knew from his reading that criminals had twisted minds. Their reasons for doing strange things could seem perfectly normal and logical to them. Then, what would the reason be? Why had they given up the attempt to get what they wanted in his house? He felt himself straining inside, on the verge of getting the answer. But it wouldn't come.

He jumped up, went to the kitchen, and got his flashlight from the drawer by the sink. Cora watched him but said nothing. He went to the back door, unlocked it, played the light over the groove and the scratches. They hadn't even made a good attempt to get in that way. The lock hadn't been completely forced. They may have changed their minds, decided there was a better and easier way to get in.

He strode across the porch, jumped down, played the flash on the back cellar windows. Nothing looked wrong there. He went around the house and started up the driveway. As he reached the second window, his arm stiffened. That window was open. He brought the light down onto the concrete. Two pieces of pea coal were lying just under the sill. He remembered distinctly having swept up after the coal had been delivered. He had swept the driveway last Saturday, too.

On impulse, holding his excitement firmly in check, he crawled in through the window and dropped into the crunchy, yielding pile of pea coal. The cellar light flashed on.

"George, what *are* you doing?" Cora called from the head of the cellar stairs.

"Just looking around."

JUMPING out of the coal to the cement floor, he looked around. He himself had scattered some coal as he jumped out. Yet, as he sent the flash into the corners of the uncluttered cellar he could see other pieces. They must have been kicked there very recently, for he had swept the cellar, too, on Saturday. He was sure now that both burglars had been in the house. But why?

[*Turn page*]

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They hadn't taken anything.

He heard a creak behind him, swung sharply, then relaxed as he saw Cora coming down the stairs.

"George, what are you doing?"

"Just looking around—thinking. I don't know."

He stood there a moment, then shifted the light to the corner where he had seen the pieces of coal. Just beyond was the rough wooden door to the storeroom. The burglars hadn't touched anything upstairs. Maybe they hadn't gone up at all. Maybe they had wanted something in that storeroom. He had a good set of tools in there, not worth too much, but they could easily be converted into cash. If the burglar had gone straight to that storeroom, then he must have known the house.

"Cora, who's been here lately?" he asked. "The heating man, I remember. He fixed the hot water heater about a month ago. Anybody else?"

Cora thought a moment. "Well, the drain stopped up about six weeks ago. Remember? I called Mr. McPherson to fix it."

George bit his lip. "Think back carefully. Did anything out of the ordinary happen while he was here or while that heating man was here?"

"No," she replied slowly. "Not that I—Wait. Yes, I remember Mr. McPherson had a boy with him—a boy named Mike. McPherson kept complaining about his laziness. Later, he came back—Mr. McPherson, that is—and returned a pair of pliers he said the boy had taken by mistake."

George snapped his fingers. "That's it. That wasn't a mistake. McPherson was covering for the boy."

He strode to the storeroom, a vague excitement gripping him. He saw it now. He was sure he knew the answer.

He went into the storeroom, looked around quickly and spotted the wooden cover to the sewage trap under the gas and electric meters. He was trembling a little as he dropped to his knees and pried at the cover with his fingernails. It came up with a soft *plop*. He froze, his brain a maelstrom of crazy ideas.

There, by the drain, was a large white

envelope. He was conscious that Cora was standing over him as he reached down and picked up the envelope. He opened it and heard Cora gasp.

The envelope was filled with money.

"Ed Manley's money!" she breathed.

"Ed Manley's money," George repeated numbly. "That's why—"

He broke off, jumped to his feet, fear stabbing through him. He could have sworn— Yes, that was a stair creaking. Someone was coming down the stairs!

His finger leaped to his lips. He motioned to the window, made Cora understand she should crawl out through it. He couldn't go himself. He dared not. He had to get that boy, hold him if possible. If that boy got away and the police caught him with Manley's money, the chain would be complete.

Fear tingled along his spine as he moved out of the storeroom. Cora was standing very still behind him, as if paralyzed with fright. He wanted to give her a push but dared not.

He stopped short in the doorway. As he had expected, a man was standing at the bottom of the steps, a young man with a heavy, puffy face. He had a gun.

"You're Mike," George heard himself say.

"Yeah, I'm Mike," the boy said flatly.

The gun leveled. George felt his stomach muscles tighten so hard that a sick feeling shot through him. He could see that the boy's eyes were bloodshot, that his white hand was shaky. Doped, the kid was full of dope. George knew the boy was primed to kill. He wondered why he was delaying.

"Tell your wife not to try to get out of that window," the boy said in a loud voice, loud enough for Cora to hear. "If she does, I'll kill you."

George heard a soft thump and knew the front window had fallen back into place. Cora hadn't acted quickly enough. He could feel sweat break out on the small of his back. He wanted to call out to her, tell her to go out, anyway. The boy was vicious enough to kill her, too, to kill all witnesses who could tell the police about him.

George licked his lips. "It was smart, in a way. After you killed Manley, you figured you didn't dare have anybody know you had

[*Turn page*]

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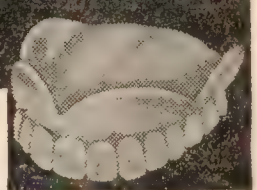

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all that money. You figured this would be a good place to hide it until the heat died down, didn't you?"

"Yeah." The gun wavered a little. "Tell your wife to come out here where I can see her."

DESPERATELY, George played for time. "Your pal lost his nerve and decided to come back and get the money so he could get far away, wasn't that it?"

"Yeah, he lost his nerve. He was going to the cops and—" The boy caught himself, scowled. "I'm warning you—your wife better get out here or I'll kill you. I killed twice tonight. Once more won't hurt any."

George waved the envelope. "Here's the money. Don't you want it?"

The boy took an instinctive step forward, his hand reaching. George prayed, tossed the envelope to one side of the boy's feet.

Greed did its work. The boy turned to pick it up. George flung himself forward desperately, yelling to rattle the boy more.

The boy snarled, pivoted, tried to regain his balance. The gun went off like a clap of thunder in the little cellar. George hit the boy's shoulder and sent him staggering back. Giving him no chance to recover, he clamped a lock on the boy's arm and twisted savagely, mercilessly. The boy let out a piercing scream. The gun dropped, and George kicked it away. He pushed the boy away, lashed out with all his muscle and bone. The crack of his fist on the boy's jaw sent a streak of pain up his arm. He ignored it and lashed out once more.

That was enough. The boy staggered in a crazy circle, his eyes glassy, and collapsed.

Hysterical and incoherent, Cora ran to George. He picked up the gun to make sure the boy wouldn't get it. He took his wife in his arms, keeping an eye on the unconscious figure. In a few moments, Cora stopped crying and snapped out of it.

For a long moment, they just stood there, staring. Finally George sighed.

"I guess you'd better get the police, Cora. I'll stay here and watch him." He shook his head sadly. "How I'm ever going to get anything done tomorrow—"

She started for the stairs, paused. "George,

I think you worry too much about your business. You have friends. You'll raise the money you need. I'm sure of it." She smiled uncertainly and added, "Even if you don't, please don't worry. We'll get along. We'll always have this satisfaction, won't we? We did what was right."

George reddened as he looked up at her. He hoped she'd never know how close his foolishness had driven them toward a real disaster, a disaster worse than any he could have had in business. But he guessed he had learned, learned the hard way. It didn't pay to put business before murder.

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By Cellblock Sam

Newark, N. J.:
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Cairo:
Policeman have the right to grow mustaches as long as they like.
—Egyptian State Council Court

Trenton, N. J.:
A saloon is responsible when a customer falls off his bar stool. Bartenders should keep an eye on the patrons.
—New Jersey Appellate Court

Bulawayo, Rhodesia:
Stealing hotel soap and towels is part of the general education of the native.
—Local Court

Baltimore, Md.:
When a pinball machine lets you shoot only one ball for a nickel, you're not shooting for the fun of it.
—Circuit Court

Portland, Tenn.:
Cops on duty can't shoot pool.
—City Council

Cleveland, O.:
A man of 81 is perfectly capable of fathering a child.
—City Medical Examiners

Washington, D. C.:
Applicants for the Navy are not eligible if they do not remove their nude tattoos—or at least drape them.
—U. S. Navy

Budapest:
Staircase banisters must be equipped with large knobs to prevent youngsters from sliding down.
—Communist Ministry of Construction

Burbank, Calif.:
Bees must refrain from swarming within twenty feet of human habitation.
—City Council

Oklahoma City, Okla.:
Movie ushers have no right to spank patrons even if they are somewhat on the noisy side.
—Police Court

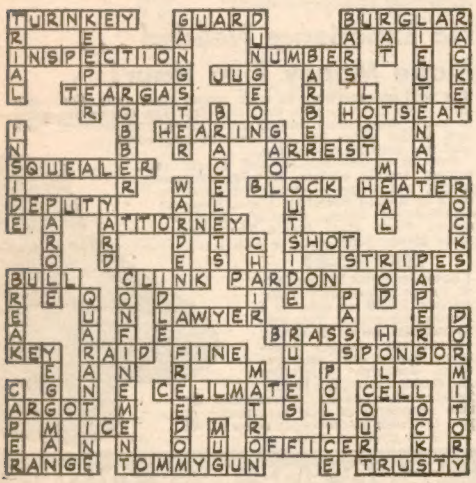
Kimball, S. D.:
It's illegal for hogs to eat on the main street.
—City Ordinance

Mount Rainier, Md.:
A dog may chase people up trees, but he's not vicious until he actually takes a bite out of someone.
—Police Court

PUZZLE PAGE

(Answers to Puzzles on page 97)

SKELETON PUZZLE



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People demand nationally advertised Mason Shoes because of their exclusive comfort features, up-to-the-minute styling. Foamy-soft exclusive Velvet-Eez Air Cushion innersole makes walking a real pleasure—like "walking on air!" Ten-second demonstration lets customer actually feel air cushion, brings quick sales!

These splendid shoes bear famous Good Housekeeping Guarantee Seal.

Velvet-eez

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-903, Chippewa Falls, Wisc.

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You need no experience to make money right away. Some men have made up to 20 sales their first day. You feature 181 styles of smart dress shoes, casual sport shoes, and practical work and service shoes for men and women, boots and fine leather jackets, too.

Sell to service station and garage men, waiters, factory workers, barbers, waitresses, nurses, housewives — everybody! Such features as Rugged Horsehide Shoes, Neoprene Oil-Resistant Soles, Gro-Cork Slip-Resistant Soles, Steel Safety Toe shoes make Mason Shoes easy to sell.

SEND NOW!

I have a powerful Selling Outfit I'm going to send you absolutely FREE as soon as I receive your coupon. This outfit includes actual 10-second demonstrator, famous Automatic Selling Plan, and features exclusive Velvet-Eez Air-Cushion shoes, fine leather jackets—other fast-selling specialties. To take advantage of this opportunity of your life, rush me the coupon below NOW! You'll be glad you did!

SEND FOR FREE OUTFIT

Mr. Ned Mason, Sales Manager
Mason Shoe Mfg. Co., Dept. M-903
Chippewa Falls, Wisc.

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